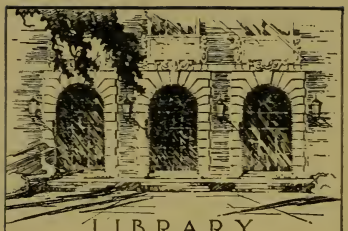

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THE WOMAN IN THE DARK

VOL. II.

THE WOMAN IN THE DARK

BY

F. W. ROBINSON

AUTHOR OF

'COWARD CONSCIENCE,' 'LAZARUS IN LONDON,' 'WOMEN ARE STRANGE,'
'THE HANDS OF JUSTICE,' ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES

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CONTENTS OF VOL. II.

CHAPTER		PAGE
XVI.	THE TRUTH OF IT	1
XVII.	WHO IS THIS MAN?	17
XVIII.	WAITING	31
XIX.	CLAUDE CALLS	39
XX.	HIS WIFE'S SISTER	52
XXI.	OLIVER IS ENIGMATICAL	65
XXII.	ON THE HILLS AGAIN	78
XXIII.	BECOMING CONFIDENTIAL	100
XXIV.	SPEAKING HER MIND	117
XXV.	DIGNITY OR IMPUDENCE?	129
XXVI.	ALTERCATION	139
XXVII.	HOW MURIEL THOUGHT IT WAS DONE	154
XXVIII.	ASKING A FAVOUR	164
XXIX.	A CHECKMATE	180
XXX.	A LAST EFFORT	195
XXXI.	AT THE BELOC SHAFT	205
XXXII.	NEMESIS	222

THE WOMAN IN THE DARK

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TRUTH OF IT.

As Muriel, oppressed by her new foreboding that all was not well at Rossendale, turned in the direction of home, she was startled to feel a hand upon her arm.

'One instant,' said a voice in her ear; 'don't turn back, please. Pardon me for detaining you, but I am anxious to speak to you for a few moments — terribly anxious.'

The man addressed her in a very hurried

and excited way, and Muriel, for an instant, knew not what course to adopt. It did not strike her that she had met him before —that in any way he belonged to a past in which she had had any share—and she shook his hand from her arm indignantly.

'I do not know you, sir. How dare——'

'My name is Faremouth—Claude Faremouth,' was the explanation quickly proffered. 'I saw you last night for the first time.'

'Claude Faremouth—here!'

They were passing a street-lamp, and she peered into his face. Yes, it was the man to whom Oliver Toope had introduced her last night—the husband of the fair woman to whom she was hurrying back, as if to her rescue. As if there could be any danger menacing Mrs. Faremouth — how

foolish and nervous she had grown all of a sudden!

'Oh, I did not recognise you at first!' she said, almost breathlessly. 'Where is Oliver? Is he with you? He promised me that he would not come to Great Storn's Head until I wrote, or—but what are you doing here without him?'

Not until the words had escaped her did it strike Muriel Reeves that she had no right to ask these questions of a gentleman to whom she had only said a few words last night for the first time, and she was on the verge of an apology as hurried as her late inquiries had been when he answered her quickly, and without evincing any surprise at her abruptness.

'I could not remain at Llanwyssander to-night. I left Oliver at home, and came on over the hills to see you.'

'Over the hills,' repeated Muriel.

'Yes; it is a favourite walk of mine since I have been in Wales. It tires me. I can sleep after it.'

'To see me?' added Muriel, concluding the question she was about to ask of him.

'Yes,' he replied; 'for it is you to whom I look to solve a doubt that is oppressing me—that has come to me within the last few hours. I can hardly tell how—or why—but so it is.' He shrugged his shoulders and added: 'Oliver will tell you that I am a restless fellow, who gives him a deal more trouble than I am worth; but Oliver is a good fellow, and does not mind.'

'Does he know you have come to Great Storn's to-night?'

'No, he does not know that. He would

have persuaded me to wait till the morning, and I had grown very restless.'

'Like all the rest of us,' thought Muriel; but she said, 'Why have you come?'

'I had a strong belief possessing me that you could solve a mystery.'

'Well, I think I can,' Muriel confessed.

'Ha! it is true, then. You know—you know!'

'Tell me what it is that you expect, Mr. Faremouth, and I will answer you. I—I hope that you will not act too precipitately; much may depend upon your caution, your consideration. I—I do not know if it be in any way my place to tell you the truth,' she added hesitatingly, 'if—if Oliver will be pleased with me for doing so; but I feel so helpless, I am surrounded by so much mystery, that I know not what is best.'

'Great God! who does, in this world?' he exclaimed passionately.

Muriel glanced askance at him. He seemed suddenly to be afraid to question her, anxious even to delay the inquiry which he had come all the way from Llanwyssander to make. He was like a man to whom the truth might come with too great a shock, and cast him wholly down. What did he know? How much of this truth, or how little, and how would it affect him? Had she not better proceed cautiously? The truth was under any circumstances close enough upon him without her acting too rashly in the matter.

'Will you tell me what you suspect or know, Mr. Faremouth—the exact reason for your coming here—everything?'

'Yes, certainly. Shall we turn?'

'No, let us go on towards Rossendale,

please. I would prefer it,' answered Muriel.

'I seem afraid of Rossendale,' he muttered.

'Why afraid of it?'

'Mr. Gladwell might see us together.'

'Mr. Gladwell might be very glad to see you.'

'Oh no, that is not likely, if he be the man I suspect and hate.'

'Why do you hate him?'

'Ah, that will take a long time to explain,' he replied. 'He has deceived me for many years—kept back all explanation from me—been in a plot with others to betray me—has so much to confess when I hold him by the throat that you needn't be surprised that I should hate him. Rather wonder in your heart why I have not killed him.'

'The man you hate is Gladwell?'

'His name is Horbury.'

'And he and Gladwell are one and the same, you think?'

'I am almost sure of it,' was the reply. 'Oliver's description of him, and of his wife, my sister-in-law—the inquiries that I have made in the town this evening—all confirm my first suspicions; and you, Miss Reeves, will help me on towards the truth.'

'If I can I will,' Muriel answered. 'But the truth is so close upon you already, and there is, I hope, so much of happiness advancing along with it, that I have hardly a right to forestall the revelation.'

'I—I don't understand you now,' he said, looking in a bewildered manner at Muriel. 'Happiness! What possible happiness can there be for me?'

'Your wife——'

He snatched at Muriel's arm, held her tightly by the wrist, bent down, and peered closely in her face.

'What do you know of my wife?'

'That she is safe and well—that she is getting well rapidly,' said Muriel, correcting herself.

'Is she with them at Rossendale, then? My wife!' he exclaimed, in his new astonishment.

'Gertrude Faremouth—if that lady be your wife, sir—is certainly at Rossendale.'

'With these Gladwells, as they call themselves?'

'Yes, with them.'

'For how long has this been? Tell me, if you have heard. You cannot imagine what the difference may be to me. Why, I may pass from hell to heaven in one

step. Oh! if you only knew—you only knew—all that is in my heart. For how long a time has Gertrude Faremouth been with them?'

'For some years, I believe.'

'Here?'

'Here, and in London.'

'Always together—those three?'

'So far as I can follow a story of which fragments only have drifted to me, always together.'

'I thought that you might have given me valuable information concerning my wife, but not of this kind. Let us turn; for Heaven's sake turn back with me!' he urged, 'and tell me the story as it appears to you. You are quick, clear-sighted, clever, Oliver says, and I am in the clouds.'

'Will you not come to Rossendale and see your wife?'

'I dare not approach her yet; I have not the courage. Pray turn back with me!' he said, in a deep, tremulous voice that there was no resisting.

'They can explain so much better than I.'

'I should be glad to hear you, and only you,' he said.

Muriel turned back with him, and they went slowly towards the sea again, past the broad road at the end of the parade, along the parade itself, heedless of the time. It was Muriel's ill-fortune to exceed her privileges, and be always late at Rossendale; but the result this time would justify the extension of leave, she thought. The clouds were parting, the light was stealing through, and there were peace and goodwill coming to them all. What a story to tell her sister Em when she got back to Kennington—sister Em, the little un-

successful novelist, whose head was full of so many stories of her own, and not one of them so wild and unaccountable as this had proved to be.

When they were on the parade, with the sea-breeze blowing on them, Claude Faremouth said :

'Let us sit here ; no one will interrupt us.'

Muriel and Claude Faremouth were sitting side by side on one of the iron seats along the parade. Even with this story to form a link between them, Muriel wondered, with a spasm of a smile which she could not repress, what Oliver Toope would think of it all if he came suddenly face to face with them ? Would there be jealousy and anger and black looks—just after the same old pattern !—till the position was satisfactorily made clear to him ?

It was somewhat of a long story which Muriel Reeves had to relate, although her sojourn at Rossendale extended over so short a period of time. Much had happened during those fleeting hours that she was never likely to forget again; much that was inexplicable still remained to excite and confuse her; but she was explicit in her way, offering to Claude Faremouth a clear statement of the impressions which had been conveyed to her. He listened with deep attention, his hands clasped tightly together, his small, piercing eyes fixed upon Muriel's countenance, watching every varying phase therein.

'She has been insane, then, all these years?'

'Yes.'

'You believe that?'

'I have no reason to doubt it in any way.'

'Poor woman! Poor neglected wife! What a cruel injustice I have done you,' he said; 'and her sister Lavinia has been kind to her, has protected her all along?'

'She speaks well of her sister, and of her husband too.'

'Horbury?'

'Yes.'

'If she only knew as much of him as I know,' said Claude, clenching his hands; 'if his wife only dreamt of it! Have you any conception why Gertrude has been kept away from me, why her malady has never been communicated to me, why I have been in one indirect fashion or another led to think her false?'

'False!'

'Yes; false to me, tired of me, in love and in league with another man.'

'What villain could have done you so cruel a wrong?'

'I shall know in time,' he muttered.

'This Horbury?' said Muriel, with a thrill of horror at the thought, 'has he sown these suspicions in your mind?'

'Presently we shall know,' he answered, evasively again.

'What possible motive could he have to deceive you thus?'

'There are motives which move most men and many women,' he replied. 'The awful, hateful curse of money.'

'But in what way can money——'

'I will not say a word more against my enemies to-night. Enemies and friends, darkness and light, evil and good, are all strangely commingled, and the truth which you have told me clashes strangely with what I have been taught to believe till this

day. Let us go to her for the solution to the riddle.'

He sprang to his feet, and Muriel followed his example. She looked round in a scared way as she rose, and exclaimed:

'The lights are out on the pier. What time can it possibly be?'

'It is growing late,' he said.

'They will wonder what has become of me,' said Muriel.

'I will explain,' he replied. 'It is my fault to have detained you so long.'

'You return with me to see Mrs. Faremouth?'

'Yes. Who has a greater right than I?'

'No one,' answered Muriel.

He said 'Thank you' in a low voice, and Muriel hardly knew what he was thanking her for.

CHAPTER XVII.

'WHO IS THIS MAN?'

Yes, it was very late—that is, late for a town which is astir early, and has markets and fishing interests to consider soon after sunrise. The shops were shut, the parade was almost deserted—a few stragglers like themselves occasionally passed along. The lights were scanty in the windows of the houses opposite, save where the hotels were, which were ablaze with gas, and resonant with the voices of innumerable visitors singing and gossiping in the drawing-room, arguing in the smoke-room, and swearing

profusely over bad shots in the billiard-room.

When Claude and Muriel were clear of the town, the way to Rossendale lay before them very dark indeed; and when they had reached Rossendale itself, the windows were blank and black, and only a glimmer of light was showing over the fanlight above the street door.

'The house is closed for the night,' said Muriel. 'Tell me what time it is.'

A church clock in the town striking eleven clanged out the information before Claude Faremouth could respond.

'Eleven!' said Muriel. 'What will they say?'

'I will tell them you came to me as the messenger of good tidings,' he said, as they went up the pathway together.

Muriel reached out her hand to ring the

bell very gently, but to her astonishment the door opened at the same moment, and Mr. Gladwell stood on the threshold of the dimly-lighted hall. He glared savagely at the late-comers, as a man kept out of his bed unnecessarily, and who has had to sit up, does glare not unfrequently.

'Miss Reeves, upon my soul I——' he began in a suppressed guttural voice, then he paused, drew a deep breath, and said quickly and nervously, 'Who is that with you? Who is this man?'

The man answered quickly for himself.

'I am Claude Faremouth. You should know me well enough, James Horbury,' he said.

'Great God!'

The master of Rossendale recoiled a step, then set his back to the wall for moral and material support, and panted for breath.

Muriel and Claude stepped into the hall, and Muriel looked irresolutely from one to the other, wondering what would follow the meeting between them.

'You have not received my letter, Claude?' Horbury gasped; 'it could not possibly have reached you at Llanwyssander yet.'

'No; I have received no letter.'

'I wrote to you to come to us. I have explained everything—you were expected to-morrow, Claude.'

'How did you obtain my address?'

'From Gertrude—she knows.'

'She knows!' Claude repeated wonderingly.

The two men did not offer to shake hands. James Horbury showed no pleasure at the sight of his wife's brother-in-law, though they had not exchanged a word for ten long

years or thereabouts, though Claude had been long reported dead, and was standing there before him as a man out of his grave might stand on Judgment Day.

James Horbury was affrighted, not pleased. He was taken off his guard by the unexpected visitor whom Muriel had brought to the house, and for which action he cursed her very heartily under his breath. What a meddlesome, mischievous she-devil was this, who had come from Kennington Lane to Great Storn's Head, the agent of a deadly vengeance at the last! Without her coming all would have been well with him and his, and he might have found salvation by a hair's breadth.

He had been filling his pipe from his crimson plush pouch when Muriel and Claude had arrived, and he tossed those articles petulantly on to the hall table now.

'To-morrow there will be no more mystery on your wife's side or your own, Claude,' continued Horbury; 'and I thank Heaven for it. It has not been of my creating.'

'Why are you living under a false name?'

'I will tell you the whole story to-morrow, Claude,' he answered. 'The hour is very late; Lavinia is ill, and in her first sleep—pray come to-morrow. God be praised that you are here in our midst again!' he ejaculated fervently; 'but, oh, come to-morrow, for your wife's sake!'

'I will see my wife to-night.'

James Horbury shivered and wrung his hands almost in despair.

'As you please—if you wish,' he said; 'but I warn you, Claude, that you will kill her if you do.'

'If all be true that I have heard to-night

from the lips of this good woman, I have been killing her for years by my distrust,' said Claude. 'Stand aside, James Horbury, I am going to find my wife.'

'At your peril, then,' the other said. 'Her life is in your hands—not mine. I am, of course, quite helpless. Bear me witness, Miss Reeves, that I disown any responsibility if Mr. Faremouth insists on seeing my sister-in-law to-night.'

'Why are you afraid?' asked Claude.

'She has been unduly excited this evening. She has already overtaxed the little strength she has, and you will not leave her to the rest she greatly needs. Is time so precious with you, Claude,' Horbury cried vehemently, 'that you will risk the wrecking of her mind again in your selfish haste to see her?'

Claude Faremouth regarded the speaker

critically. He was not deeply impressed by his eloquence, but there was reason in it, and in these latter days Claude had become more amenable to reason.

The darkness and the stillness of the house were significant of the truth of the statement that its inmates had retired to rest, and the hour of explanation, the recital of all the doubts and wrongs and sorrows, the reconciliation to come, the thoughts of happiness so close at hand to follow the storm and stress, assured him that it were wise to wait a while.

He looked in a vague, irresolute way at Muriel.

'What shall I do?' he asked in a low voice, as though she were the arbiter, and the result was in her hands.

'I would wait till to-morrow,' Muriel said; 'I think it would be fairer to her.'

'Very well, be it so,' Claude said, as he turned towards the open door; 'I will come to-morrow morning.'

James Horbury drew a long, deep breath of relief, but neither Muriel nor Claude noticed this, or there might have followed fresh suspicion, and, as by the touch of a mighty hand, the basest of projects might have crumbled into dust.

On the threshold Claude paused and said:

'Where is Lavinia?'

'She is asleep.'

'Give my love to her,' he said, and stepped into the dark.

James Horbury followed him to the door.

'Claude!' he called.

Claude Faremouth stopped once more.

'We have not been good friends—we have never been good friends,' James Horbury said, 'and at the eleventh hour, and even

with all past mistakes rectified between us, it is not probable that you and I will care for one another. You have misjudged me; I have not been fair to you; but let me say this now, that I am very glad you have come back to Gertrude—for both your sakes.'

'Not for your own sake?'

'That matters not to me.'

'We shall see to-morrow,' Claude Faremouth answered as he went upon his way.

James Horbury watched him out of the front garden and along the dark, tree-shadowed footway; then he closed the door and looked very hard at Muriel Reeves.

'Where did you meet him?' he asked slowly.

'On the parade.'

'By appointment?'

'No, by accident.'

'He has come over the hills from Llanwyssander?'

'Yes.'

'I might have asked him to remain here quietly, but I am a churlish host, and cannot trust him. He is almost as mad as his wife has been. A well-matched couple, those two,' he said, shrugging his shoulders; 'but all's well that ends well, Miss Reeves.'

'Yes, all is well, and ending well, I trust,' answered Muriel.

'It is strange—exceedingly strange—that you should be involved in this poor, pitiful business,' he said, still regarding her thoughtfully, 'and I fail to understand it. But we will wait till to-morrow for this explanation too—wait for everything. Good-night.'

'Good-night.'

To Muriel's astonishment he offered her his hand.

'I am deeply indebted to you for seconding my suggestion that Claude should not see poor Gertrude to-night,' he said. 'It was very kind of you to aid my effort to postpone so painful a meeting as this must surely be.'

Muriel shook hands, and then said, with her foot on the first stair upwards:

'Why will it be painful?'

'Ah, you do not know how unjust and violent a man Claude Faremouth is, even at his best,' he replied. 'There is much to explain, and Gertrude is a weak woman—very weak, and still very strange.'

'You do not fear a relapse?'

'I do.'

'I should be sorry—so very sorry.'

'Yes, of course you would feel this; you have known her for so long a time,' he added, with a laugh that made Muriel

recoil from him with a sudden sense of repulsion difficult to account for, and influenced more by the look upon his face than by the feeble satire of his words. But this closed the interview, and Muriel went upstairs to her room, thinking of it all. As she went there came to her slowly the fear, perhaps the conviction, that all was not well yet, or likely to end well, despite his prophecy; that there were depths she had not sounded, mysteries she had not pierced in the unfathomable lives by which she was encompassed.

With her hand upon the door of her own room there came to her a strange wish, which was the outcome of her new fear. She had sided with James Horbury against Claude Faremouth. It had seemed natural and right, when she had been asked to speak, to seek to spare the sick woman further trial

that night; but as she passed into her room the new wish, the undefined fear, went with her like a spirit.

'I wish that I had not said, "Come to-morrow,"' she whispered to herself.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WAITING.

Meanwhile James Horbury had walked into the study, where Muriel had been allowed to see her lover by express permission of her employers, where the lovers' long quarrel had been made up, and all with them, at least, had, to their sanguine natures, seemed fair sailing till the end of time over a prosperous sea, rosy with the dawn of the new day. When James Horbury was alone, and had noiselessly locked himself in, so that no one should be witness to the change in him, he was a different man indeed. He had

acted well and coolly throughout the interview with Claude Faremouth, and had been almost his old self talking to Miss Reeves afterwards; and it was well that neither of those two should have seen him as he was. They might doubt him—they did doubt him—but they did not know him. Thank God they did not know him, and could not probe to the depths of his acuteness. He had succeeded in deceiving them; he had gained time—the priceless time for which he had yearned; it had all been postponed till the morrow — that morrow which never comes. God in heaven, how true that was for them! Not for him, never for him, now that he had time to reflect upon the matter, for that morrow would be a hell from which it would be beyond his power to escape. He was successful, but he did not look a successful man, sitting there in the

glare of his table lamp, with one clenched hand resting on the table, and the darkness of night itself upon his awful soul. It was all planned out, it had been carefully planned for more than a week, and all that he had plotted for had pieced itself together like the joints of a child's puzzle map. Even the coming of Claude Faremouth had not disconcerted him.

He had acted his part thoroughly, and those who had suspected him had fallen into his trap and done exactly as he had wished them to do. What a clever fellow he was! How cautious, and how cunning! To think that these petty, common-place minds should dare to cope with him!

He was triumphant, but in the hour of his triumph he looked very like a devil. It was hardly a human countenance that was gleaming at him from a mirror hung on the

opposite wall, and catching sight of it, he looked another way, and shuddered till the table shook and the glass on the oil-lamp jangled harshly.

He got up, walked to a sideboard, poured himself out a wineglassful of brandy, which he drank off at one gulp, and then sat down again, like a man waiting for something, or expecting somebody—a man who had come before his hour, and had to kill time with those terrible thoughts from which there was no shelter. Grim, patient, silent, and yet soul-distraught, this man was waiting for the dead of the night, when all at Rossendale should be sleeping calmly in their beds, and he alone watchful for his prey.

Presently he turned the lamp down, unlocked and opened wide the study door, and sat down again in a chair close to the hall,

listening for any sound which might betray the presence of some living, wakeful thing that he would have at rest.

There was a big old clock in the hall that ticked unpleasantly loudly, and he wondered he had not noticed before that it was too noisy a clock, and might waken folk from their first sleep with its solemn, resonant ticking.

He sat there five minutes, then he stole into the hall with noiseless tread, took his tobacco-pouch and pipe from the hall table, thrust them into his pocket, and stood there listening, with his face turned up to the well-staircase, as if he thought someone's scared, white features might look back at him over the heavy balusters, and some woman's voice—perhaps of that woman Muriel, curse her !—ask what was the matter that he looked like that at her. Satisfied that all

was silent, he went upstairs on tiptoe, pushed open softly the door of his wife's room, and passed in, drawing it close behind him, but not shutting it. Here he stood, very silent again, and looked down at his wife, who was sleeping heavily, and breathing hard—the sleep of one who had drugged herself into oblivion of the cares of the world and of the evil stalking abroad in the night, and of which she did not even dream.

'Lavinia!' he whispered, but Lavinia was not likely to wake for hours. He had been sure of that before he hissed her name, but he would make assurance doubly sure. He passed from the room, crossed the broad landing-place, and turned the handle of the door of Mrs. Faremouth's room. The door was unlocked, the key was gone again, and Mrs. Faremouth had not noticed its abstrac-

tion in her new day of perfect confidence, in the dawn of the new hopes which her awakened mind and her husband's miraculous return to her had brought to her at last.

The sitting-room was very dark, and the intruder was glad of that. It might not be well for Gertrude to see his face just yet—if it were still anything like that which he had caught sight of in the room downstairs! That was awful, indeed—the face of one of the damned!

He tapped softly on the panels of the inner door, and a voice answered immediately:

'Who is there?'

'It is I—James. Don't be alarmed, Gertrude,' he said in a low, clear voice; 'but you must get up and dress yourself and come with me.'

'With you?'

'Yes; Claude has met with an accident at Llanwyssander. He wishes to see you at once. A messenger has brought a note for you.'

'Is there danger? Oh no; not danger, James!'

'Hush! not so loud; we shall wake Lavinia. There is no immediate danger, but Mr. Toope is anxious you should be with Claude—most anxious.'

'God help us!

'Ay, God help us!' repeated James Horbury to himself.

'I will come at once.'

Yes; it was as well that the sitting-room of Mrs. Faremouth was very dark indeed.

CHAPTER XIX.

CLAUDE CALLS.

Muriel Reeves was punctual at breakfast next morning. She had rather lost her character for punctuality; but here was an opportunity to make amends. These were early days at Rossendale, though it appeared to our heroine's imaginative faculties that she had been about two years under the shadow of the Great Storn's Head. Time had not dragged on so slowly with her, but so much had happened during her stay in Wales—a mad woman stepping back to sanity, a wife thought false reconciled to her

husband, the husband thought dead restored to active life, the old quarrel between herself and Oliver Toope reduced to consistency or scattered to the winds, plots and counterplots and mysteries on every side of her, some vanishing and some increasing, but, still, the darkness giving place, she hoped, to sunshine. This was to be the beginning of the happy, peaceful days, with more than one of our characters looking forward to the light—alas! the light that never came to most of them.

Muriel was first in her place at the breakfast-table; it was satisfactory to be first, and to be conscious that Mr. and Mrs. Horbury—was she to call them Gladwell or Horbury, she wondered, now?—were not downstairs yet, although the clock upon the mantelpiece had chimed the hour of nine. Here was a seat placed for Mrs. Faremouth

also; she was to be one of the family from that day, and the lonely room upstairs would be merged in the general establishment.

Jenny, the parlour-maid, looked astonished on entering to find Muriel alone in the room.

'Master not down yet, Miss Reeves?' she said in a tone of surprise. 'Well, I never knew that happen before.'

'What time did he come in from his walk?' Muriel inquired.

'He has not been out,' said Jenny. 'There are his boots outside his door, just as I put them there early this morning. He—oh lor, sir! how you scared me!'

Jenny beat a hurried retreat at finding her master close at her elbow. He had entered noiselessly in his felt slippers, and he laughed in his old good-tempered way at Jenny's confusion and abrupt retreat. To

Muriel it did not appear to be much of a joke, but Horbury, alias Gladwell, was easily amused that morning. Was he pleased that Claude Faremouth was coming to claim his wife and to take her away? He was in excellent spirits, though he looked remarkably ill, Muriel thought; his was a grayish and haggard countenance, although afflicted that morning with an eternal smile, which did not seem to brighten it.

'Good morning, young lady. I had not the slightest idea that you were so deeply interested in my boots,' he said, laughing. 'Fancy you and Jenny starting that topic between you.'

'I was not interested in your boots, Mr. Gladwell,' said Muriel calmly.

'Oh, I beg pardon; I heard Jenny offering you a long explanation about them,' he said; 'where they were, and what time

she had put them outside my door, and so forth.'

'I asked if you had returned from your walk, not finding you in the room,' said Muriel.

'I have not been out this morning,' he replied. 'Late hours last night—waiting for your return home, perhaps—made me extra sleepy. Mrs. Gladwell is not yet awake, by the way, and will not join us this morning.'

'And Mrs. Faremouth,' said Muriel.

'What of her?' he asked quickly, and with even a scared look at Muriel.

'She will keep to her room?'

'I do not know,' he said; 'one of the maids shall go up presently for instructions. She will breakfast in her own room, most likely, after her old habit. Hence we are *tête-à-tête* again, Muriel. Like Fate, it is to be.'

He laughed again, quite noisily, as he rang the bell by the side of the fireplace; but Muriel wore no reciprocal smile upon her face. This was the first time that he had called her solely by her Christian name, and she did not like it. 'Miss Muriel' had been bad enough, but to be spoken to as a man might speak to his sister, or his sweetheart, or his wife was objectionable to her, prim and fastidious as he might consider her if she gave expression to her distaste to his familiarity of address—which she certainly should, and at the earliest opportunity. She was sure that Oliver would not like it, and she detested it herself. It was 'like his impudence,' as the saying is.

But Mr. Gladwell was in excellent spirits, if a trifle restless. He hummed snatches of opera music as he looked out of the window into the highroad, and when he had seated

himself at the breakfast-table he continued his strain very softly for awhile, his fingers drumming softly on the table-cover as upon an imaginary piano. Muriel had been delegated to the post which the mistress generally occupied at the foot of the table, and she poured out the coffee, whilst he made himself busy with a dish of kidneys and bacon, and was a long time finding something to suit his palate and Muriel's.

Muriel noticed that he did not eat, although he made a vigorous pretence of doing so—that he even shivered as he raised his fork to his mouth and set it down again, as though food was at that moment particularly distasteful to him. He took his cup from Muriel's hands with some avidity, but he made no better progress with his coffee, and sat stirring it in a mechanical fashion, his eyes fixed on Muriel.

'I do not feel in the mood for breakfast to-day somehow,' he said at last lightly. 'This oversleeping one's self has robbed me of the appetite which I should have found out of doors.'

'On the hills?' said Muriel.

'Yes—exactly, on the hills, as you say. On the hills, if one has time—if—— Oh, here are the letters! Thank you, Jenny. Are there any for Miss Reeves?'

'Three, sir.'

'Pass them to her. You are rich in correspondents this morning, Muriel.'

He gave another short laugh, took up his own letters, and critically examined the superscriptions on the envelopes, choosing a long blue official envelope to break into for a beginning. It contained only the prospectus of a public company, but it was a wide sheet of paper when opened, and he

could hold it between Muriel and himself—cower behind it, so that she could not see the smile vanish from his face, and his jaw drop suddenly like a dead man's. It was a great relief to get rid of that smile for a time, to feel more like himself; but presently he peered above the upper edge of his prospectus to make sure what Muriel Reeves was doing, and when he saw that she was absorbed in her own correspondence—the first letter was from Em, with all the Kennington news told in Em's bright, cheery way—he was glad that he had not to keep up the conversation, and that he could get behind his prospectus again quite comfortably. He could not eat his breakfast; he must give up the attempt; that was a forlorn hope. He should choke if he tried to get that fat, greasy slip of bacon down his throat, and the kidneys were certainly

underdone, and—ugh!—were resting in a little pool of blood! So very much like blood that he shut his eyes for a few moments and took up his coffee-cup in blind man's fashion and tried hard to drink once more. He succeeded in the second attempt, opened his eyes again, and stared at his prospectus of an iron smelting company promising wonderful dividends, but failed to comprehend a single word that it contained. It was all Greek to him, but he tried hard to become interested.

When the door opened again he gave an awkward start, and the prospectus fluttered away from his nerveless fingers. He made no effort to pick it up, but stared at the parlour-maid who had made her appearance in the doorway with a card upon a salver, and who seemed surprised herself.

'It's—it's Mr. Faremouth, sir,' she said,

without advancing with the card — 'the gentleman who came with another gentleman the night before last to see Miss Reeves.'

'Yes—yes, I know. Ask him to step in —no—for God's sake, wait one moment! Let me think.'

He was silent for an instant, then he said to the maid-servant:

'Show him into Mrs. Faremouth's sitting-room, and tell Mrs. Faremouth where her husband is. That will be the better plan, Muriel,' he said, to Muriel's disgust again, 'the man has not come to see us, and he will be better without us. Let this model husband and wife,' he said satirically, 'get over their series of explanations together, and spare you and me the exhibition and the pain and the embarrassment of their first meeting. We are not the principal actors in their comedy, and so let them play it out

by themselves. Ha, ha ! it will be a lovers' meeting after all these years of waiting for each other—of his search for her—a long, long history of cross-purposes that a Frenchman would make a capital farce out of—a good, roaring, side-splitting farce.'

He had another vociferous laugh at the dainty notion which he had conceived. Then he began opening the rest of his etters, glancing at their contents with lack-lustre eyes, which would wander towards Muriel in spite of him.

Muriel had put her own letters in her pocket now ; she could read them upstairs ; the early arrival of Claude Faremouth had entirely changed the current of her thoughts. She caught herself listening to his footsteps upon the stairs, and picturing to herself the meeting of that husband and wife who had experienced such terrible misfortunes, and

would have so much to say. Like Mr. Horbury, she was glad that Claude Faremouth had gone to his wife's room, and that his old bitter words, recriminations, taunts, were spared the master of Rossendale. The master was not quite himself, and had dreaded the coming of Claude Faremouth. It was a happy thought to get Claude out of the way, she thought.

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CHAPTER XX.

HIS WIFE'S SISTER.

It was Jenny, the maid-servant, who created the next diversion. She had ushered Mr. Faremouth into the front sitting-room, placed a chair for him—which he did not accept, but stood with his hands behind him inspecting the photographs on the walls, as Muriel had done two afternoons ago—tapped at the inner door, opened it and passed into the bedroom. Then there was a stare round of intense surprise at the empty room, the opening of a wardrobe, and a rapid scuttling downstairs to the dining-

room again, Jenny making the exit by a second door, which opened into a corridor communicating with Mrs. Faremouth's bedroom.

'Oh, if you please, sir, Mrs. Faremouth is not in the house.'

'Not in the house? What the deuce makes you think so?' inquired the master roughly. 'Mrs. Faremouth never goes out of doors, you are aware.'

'Yes—yes—I am aware, sir,' said Jenny. 'That is what makes it so surprising. But—but her hat and cloak are gone, and oh, sir, I forgot to tell you that Mary found the hall-door open this morning—and yesterday morning, too, for the matter of that, and——'

'Have you seen your mistress?' he interrupted.

'No, sir.'

'Go to her room. Mrs. Faremouth is very probably with her; and if she is not, tell Mrs. Gladwell that her sister's husband is in the front room, and that she had better see him before me, and before Mrs. Faremouth comes back. This is very singular, Muriel,' he said, turning to our heroine as the maid beat a hasty retreat.

'It is singular,' repeated Muriel slowly.

'Why has she stolen away in this absurd manner, as if afraid to meet her husband? she who has not left this house since she came into it with us. I cannot make it out,' he said.

'She may have gone for a walk this morning, feeling better and stronger,' said Muriel.

'She would have told us first,' he replied; 'or—or, Muriel, I am afraid that there is fresh trouble coming to us, and that it is very close at hand.'

'I do not see any reason for alarm at present,' answered Muriel. 'It is premature, surely. We do not know whether Mrs. Faremouth is with her sister or not.'

'Ah—yes; I had forgotten that.'

But Mrs. Faremouth was not with her sister, and it was Mrs. Gladwell—or Mrs. Horbury, speaking by the card—who a few moments afterwards tottered into the front room, and held out both hands to Claude.

'To think that after all these years we see you again, Claude,' she said, 'and that you come in no ill-will towards us! I am so glad—so glad of this!'

He took her hands in his, stooped down, and kissed her.

'I came with no ill-will against you, Lavinia; you are her sister, whom she has always loved.'

'And who has always loved her—Heaven be my witness—and cared for her in her affliction always, and tended her with all my heart, and soul, and strength. If you, at any time, and for any reason, Claude, are disposed to be harsh with me or James, remember this to our credit, as she does always,' the sister said, with tears brimming in her eyes.

'I will remember everything, and I will bear no malice,' he replied. 'But where is Gertrude? Why does she keep away from me?'

'She is not in the house, Claude. She has gone for a walk probably, although she has not done so since we have been here. But,' Lavinia said eagerly, 'she has recovered her senses—it is like a miracle—and it will not be long ere she returns.'

'Meanwhile, tell me her story — how it

was that her mind gave way ; that you and Horbury and she left America together ; and that you and James are here under the name of Gladwell ? Tell me all, Lavinia,' he urged. 'It will save poor Gertrude the fatigue of a long explanation. She is not strong, you say, and she has a long, miserable story to hear from me. I have pardon to ask, atonement to make, a new life to begin.'

'I am also a poor invalid, Claude,' she said ; 'my health has broken down since we met last. Sometimes I think I have but a few years to live. You will spare me all you can ? You will let my husband tell his story for himself, and——'

'I will listen to you, but not to James Horbury.'

'He can explain everything so much better than I—he is so clever a business man.'

'I am not here to speak of business,' was

the reply. 'What I know, or what I suspect of your husband, must be put off till another day—a far-off day even, for what I care just now. It is only of my poor, misjudged, unhappy Gertrude that I am thinking. Where can she be, I wonder?'

'I am wondering, too.'

'Tell me of her—of all that happened to her after I was reported dead.'

'The news broke her down. She gave way utterly, Claude. We did our best to console her, but it was in vain.'

'And I was lying helpless in the hospital in India. Did she get no letter from anyone concerning me?'

'No.'

'You thought me dead, too?'

'We all thought you were dead, Claude.'

'When I returned to America there was not a trace of any of you.'

'James had long wished to settle in England. Don't you remember that?'

'No.'

'To forget his friends, or those wretches who called themselves his friends, and helped to ruin him,' she said very warmly now, 'and we stole away from them all, and began life here under a different name, so that no one should ever find us again.'

'So that I should not, amongst the rest,' said her brother-in-law moodily.

'We did not believe that you were living. It was to deceive the others—the creditors, the grumblers, the thieves—that we sank the name of Horbury for ever,' she explained. 'That was all, Claude—don't be hard on us—don't be hard on James, who has had so much to struggle with, and who is not so bad; oh, not so very bad! Only his own enemy, and weak at times, but always a

good husband, as he would be a good friend to you if you will only let him. Even a good man in many things, I pledge you my honour, Claude, one whom adversity has not wholly crushed.'

'This house does not look like adversity's school, Lavinia,' he said more lightly.

'James has been fortunate in a few speculations lately,' she said, in reply to this.

'Perhaps I have been a little too hard on James Horbury, then,' said Claude. 'I am not a fair man—I am too suspicious. I even suspected her—God forgive me—and when it came to my ears that she had fled with a lover, I was villain enough to believe it almost. But there was a doubt, thank God! there was always a doubt. But where is she? What a time she keeps away! Ah! she is coming!'

The door opened and he sprang to his feet. It was only James Horbury who entered, and who held a shaking right hand towards his visitor as he advanced and said :

'Welcome, Claude, to Rossendale again. I say that honestly, no matter what you think of me.'

'I am trying to think my best,' was the reply.

Claude Faremouth put his hand out to clasp that of James Horbury in his own, then he went back a step and took up his position at a greater distance from him. There was a cloud upon his face, too, that was not pleasant to confront, and James Horbury looked away from him. It was not safe to meet those small piercing eyes just yet.

'We will shake hands presently,' said

Claude. 'I shall be glad to think better of you, James; but it is not an easy task.'

'I am sorry. Can I say more than that?'

'There lies between you and me an open grave.'

It was James Horbury's turn to back slowly against the opposite wall, as if support were needed. His eyes were widely distorted, and his tongue came unpleasantly out of his mouth.

'What—do—you mean—by that?' he gasped forth.

'A grave,' continued Claude moodily, 'wherein are dead hopes, old animosities, and foul misdeeds. I should not care to look down upon them now, although the grave is deep enough. We will cover it up some day, please Heaven.'

'Ah, you are still poetic—or full of

charming fancies that I may call poetic,' James said. 'I understand now what you mean. Gertrude used to think once that you would make your mark in verse. Do you remember that?'

'Sir, I remember everything,' said Claude petulantly. 'It is my curse that I forget nothing. With you standing there so much of the past comes back to me that I am once more your enemy, as you are mine—as you must be mine always.'

'No, no. I dispute the assertion, Claude. I shall be able to prove myself your friend.'

Claude was not impressed. He looked vaguely round the room, and said helplessly:

'Why does Gertrude keep away? What a time she is! Will she never come back to me?'

No, Claude Faremouth, she will never

come back. It is all over—the curtain has fallen between your life and hers—and you two poor distraught souls are doomed to a life-long separation. The will of God that this should be ; but inscrutable and beyond our human reckoning. To be explained in another world, mayhap, but not in this. Here envy, hatred, and all uncharitableness must reign perforce, and bloody murder stalk amongst us, and life spin on, as the mocking world goes round.

CHAPTER XXI.

OLIVER IS ENIGMATICAL.

Gertrude Faremouth did not return to Rossendale, and the inhabitants of Great Storn's Head were greatly excited by her disappearance. There seemed no solution to the mystery, unless it was that hers had been only a temporary return to sanity, occasioned by the advent of a husband long thought dead, and that, the shock once over, the mind had swung back to its old prostrate condition. Mrs. Faremouth had wandered away in a vain quest for her husband, forgetful that he was close at hand, and there was

not a trace of her from that fatal hour. The police speculated in vain; rewards for her discovery were issued in vain; leading articles in the country papers and leaderettes in the London papers—to whom disappearances, however, were a mere drug in the market—were written in vain: Gertrude Faremouth had vanished completely away.

In what manner she had disappeared from the face of the earth was the great problem to solve; she had no knowledge of the locality; she had never stirred from the shelter of Rossendale; she was not possessed of money; how was it that no one had seen her in the town when she had stolen from the house, or had met her in the daylight afterwards? Had she gone down to the sands, and been swept away by the sea, which rose high that night, the coastguardsmen remembered? Was it

suicide, and this the sad end of a life still young, and that to her seemed strangely and brightly opening out again?

Claude Faremouth left Rossendale that morning to search for her; returned in the afternoon to make fresh inquiries; went away once more; came late at night again to James Horbury's house, bringing Oliver Toope with him. Under the tragic circumstances which had risen, or were at least foreshadowed, Oliver had not scrupled to return to Great Storn's Head, and Muriel Reeves did not attempt to scold him, or to think of scolding him, for the breaking of his word. In her joy at seeing him she forgot the promise which she had exacted, and Rossendale had grown a dark and dismal home to her. She was unhappy. No suspicion of foul play had affected her mind. She believed as others believed. Crime was

for a sensational story book, not for the active life about her, and who was there to begrudge the life of the poor, weak young wife? There was no one to hate her; there were many prepared to love her, and to rejoice at her recovery.

It was Mrs. Horbury who was the most distressed of all of them. There was less self-repression than Claude Faremouth evinced, for Claude had hope still, and Horbury's wife had not. Muriel's services came more into requisition as the wife's strength seemed to diminish.

'I shall go like her. It is in the blood, Miss Reeves,' she said despairingly. 'Some day I shall wander away, too, and be heard of no more. It is the curse bequeathed to me.'

Lavinia looked so wildly at Muriel that it was possible for the younger woman to

believe in the prophecy, despite her efforts to assure her to the contrary.

'You are naturally distressed at the disappearance of your sister,' Muriel answered. 'You give way—pardon me for saying this, madam—too readily.'

'Do you think that Gertrude will return?'

'Why should she not—as suddenly and strangely as she went away?' was the evasive rejoinder.

But Muriel hardly thought so, and what were her thoughts she could not tell to her mistress and companion. She could whisper them to Oliver Toope, for he was strong, and stood apart from the story she considered, until she remembered for how long a period of time he had been the friend of this unfortunate Claude Faremouth. Oliver's thoughts were hardly hers: he took

a cheerier, perhaps a more natural view of things, until a trouble came, and with it a new suspicion altogether. He had left the little village of Llanwyssander, and settled in Great Storn's Head by that time. Claude was with him, or affected to be with him, but his restlessness and new activity took him long journeys away from Oliver. Claude was the slave of every fresh rumour or scrap of news; he was never in repose. The shadows from which he had almost emerged had deepened around him again, and the light was not to come back. He was unaware of that. With every fresh quest there came a gleam of hope to him, and perhaps it was as well that he was ready to be thus deceived. He would have collapsed without hope in those cruel, early days.

Muriel and Oliver were together on the parade one sunny afternoon. Leave of

absence had been granted Muriel by Horbury's wife, who was disposed to be more kind and less exacting—to whom Muriel felt strangely drawn of late days.

James Horbury was wheeling his wife in the far distance, smoking placidly, talking to her and looking out to sea. Muriel and Oliver Toope looked after them. Man and wife had passed some ten minutes ago, and silent greetings had been exchanged, and hats uplifted in the conventional way.

'I don't like that fellow any better than I did, for all his new politeness,' said Oliver; 'do you?'

'I shall be glad to get back to London,' replied Muriel.

'Why don't you go, then?'

'I am waiting for Mrs. Horbury to procure a new companion; she has promised to advertise next week.'

'She promised last week,' grumbled Oliver.

'She is anxious that I should not leave her at present, and I do not care to seem uncharitable in the midst of their trouble.'

'A fortnight has softened that trouble down for them wonderfully,' said Oliver dryly; 'they do not seem to be taking any great pains to find Mrs. Faremouth. Not the pains that I should have taken in their place, and had she been a relative of my own.'

'What more can they do?

'Spend more money; go here, there, and everywhere, as Claude does. I could not rest, as those two rest, day after day,' cried Oliver indignantly. 'They are learning to forget, I should say. It is so much easier to forget all about it.'

'Ah! you are uncharitable, Oliver, un-

just. It is the remembrance of the loss that is wearing them out,' said Muriel in reply.

'What, both of them?'

'It is probable.'

Oliver Toope burst into an incredulous laugh.

'There does not seem any sign of wearing out in that free and easy fellow yonder,' he said, nodding his head in the direction which the Horburys had taken.

'He is very much changed, indeed.'

'For the better?'

'I don't know. Sometimes I think so, sometimes I think the reverse, when he is calling me Muriel, and putting on a lightness of demeanour that he does not feel and is not natural to his character.'

'Calling you Muriel! Well, of all the thundering impertinence!' blurted out Oliver Toope; 'you have never told me this.'

'It was of no particular importance.'

'It's beastly familiar.'

'I don't like it, certainly.'

'No; I should think not. I shall have to give that gentleman a bit of my mind before I leave Great Storn's Head. Muriel indeed!'

'There, you are making yourself ridiculous, Oliver.'

'Why don't you tell him to—chuck it?' he said, at a loss for a more forcible expression.

'I had intended to ask him to chuck it, as you elegantly express it,' she replied, 'but he does not seem to say it with the intention of annoying me in any way; and at times he is so desperately wretched.'

'That is because you don't call him James, perhaps,' said Oliver, with a brow as black as night.

'If you give me any of your sarcastic nonsense I shall go home,' replied Muriel warmly.

'What right has he—but here, hold hard!' he exclaimed; 'did not I promise never to be jealous again? Of course I did, and—ah! I mean it, too. As if a man could be jealous of that sulky brute! why, it's all nonsense. I beg your pardon, Muriel.'

'It is granted, Oliver. But don't do it again, please.'

'The fact is, that I'm not myself either, to-day. I'm out of sorts, too, but you don't notice that.'

'I have only noticed that you are particularly lively,' said Muriel.

'Ah! you are not as sharp-witted as you generally are, Muriel,' he replied, 'or you would have noticed it at once. I dare say

if it had been that—but there, I am an ass.'

'You are at times,' said Muriel demurely; 'that is the worst of you.'

'Pooh! it is hot down here. Let us stroll over the hills.'

'The Great Storn?'

'No; those hills yonder; where you took your early morning walk once. There will be some air stirring on the hills.'

'Very well,' said Muriel, rising.

'Do you know what Claude says about the hills?—where we may probably meet him, by the way, for he is always searching there.'

'Indeed! searching for what?'

'For a clue. He thinks that when his wife left Rossendale she went over the hills towards Llanwyssander.'

'Alone, in the dead of night, without knowing her way? Impossible!'

'I am not so sure that she was alone,' said Oliver.

Muriel caught his arm and looked earnestly into his face.

'You—you do not suspect Claude?' she asked, almost in a whisper. 'He was on the hills that night; did he meet her, did he——'

'No, no, Muriel; but I suspect James Horbury.'

'You suspect him! For any reason?'

'Yes.'

Muriel looked earnestly and critically at him. It was easy to read his face, and she knew at once that he had been keeping a secret from her.

CHAPTER XXII.

ON THE HILLS AGAIN.

Oliver Toope and Muriel Reeves went out of the town and into the country road, and ascended by slow, silent degrees towards the higher ground, and on to the great hills which hemmed in the town on all sides. It was not the custom of this humble pair of lovers to proceed in a mute-like fashion for a long period of time; there was always so much to say from one or another, so many confidences to exchange, so many fair words lightened by laughing glances, so many little sharp sentences even if a chance remark

or two brought up discussion. 'Pleasant bickerings,' Oliver termed them afterwards, when the jealous mood had been dissipated, and only the fun and folly of it remained.

On this occasion the lovers were particularly silent; the breath was difficult to get freely at certain turns of the shingly path, or the mossy slopes in which the pathway became eventually lost, but there was power left for a chance remark or an expression of affection had either of these two been inclined to converse in little gasps. They were not inclined to do so that day. Oliver had not placed perfect confidence in her, Muriel considered; he had kept a secret from her. He held possibly a clue to the solution of the mystery of Mrs. Faremouth's disappearance, and yet he had kept it all to himself. And Oliver Toope was silent for reasons of his own; he was not quite sure

now that he had acted wisely in telling Muriel what was in his thoughts, but it had escaped in spite of himself. They might be very unjust and cruel thoughts which he had no right to have of any human being in a case so dark and desperate as this might prove to be. They were talking and whispering of a woman's flight from her husband, from her home—a commonplace tragedy enough, but always a tragedy—and Oliver Toope's were deeper, darker thoughts even than that, and he had no right to distress Muriel with them. Oliver was an honest man and loved fair-play, and already he was considering whether he had acted fairly in saying that he suspected James Horbury. Suspected him of what? Of spiriting away his sister-in-law, of putting her at a distance from her husband in the fear that they should meet? For husband and wife to

meet might mean the ruin of James Horbury, he knew now.

On the top of the hill they came to a full stop, and looked back at the town and the sea, and then Oliver Toope spoke for the first time.

'You are offended with me?' he said, more gently than was his wont, for he was very often rough and quick of speech, as are straightforward men at times, the more's the pity.

'Why did you distrust me?' Muriel asked.

'It was not distrust.'

'What was it, then?'

'A fear of distressing you by vain speculation—by my own suspicions, which, after all, are not of any value.'

'Mere surmise?'

'Yes, mere surmise.'

'Well, tell me,' said Muriel; 'I am curious.'

'It is Claude's suspicions, rather than my own, and he has thrust them on me,' Oliver replied. 'Claude's secret, if it be a secret, and which I have hardly a right to recapitulate.'

'Has he asked you not to tell me?'

'Certainly not.'

'And it throws a light on Mrs. Faremouth's absence?'

'It suggests a motive.'

'Go on, Oliver,' said Muriel petulantly. 'I am as deeply interested in her as any of you—and she has not gone by fair means, I am afraid, now.'

'Not of her own free will, do you mean?' he asked.

'Perhaps not of her own free will. Tell me your impressions of this wonderful

surmise of yours, and don't be so aggravating,' she said. 'Am I likely to betray you, Oliver?'

'Muriel, what a thought!'

'Go on, sir,' said the peremptory young lady.

There was no escaping the story, and Oliver Toope did not attempt to do so any further. The Horburys, Claude Faremouth, and his wife were all very well, strange and interesting personalities to somebody or other, but Muriel was worth the lot of them; but now he was going to trouble her head with his own impressions.

'Muriel, has Claude Faremouth spoken of his wife's property in any way to you?' he inquired.

'He has spoken vaguely of money—and what a man might be tempted to do for money.'

'When was that?'

'On the night Mrs. Faremouth disappeared.'

'You were together—Claude and you? Great Scott!'

'We were on the parade before he saw James Horbury at Rossendale. He had come over these hills that night, if you remember.'

'Yes, but he had not come to see you. How did you and he come together on the parade, and late at night, too?' Oliver exclaimed wildly. 'He did not tell me he expected to meet you—and you have never said a word about that to me. Hanged if you have!'

'Secret for secret, then.'

And Muriel laughed for the first time since Mrs. Faremouth's flitting.

In the whirl of events she had not thought of her first meeting with Claude

Faremouth, and she gave him the details now, before he went on with his recital.

Oliver listened with a frown at first, but the darkling expression on his features vanished by degrees. He had certainly improved, thought Muriel; a long sea voyage and employment on board ship had taken a great deal of the jealous nonsense out of him. He would not be hard to manage by-and-by.

When Muriel had completed her narration, his broad brow suddenly contracted again, but it was with deep thought, not jealousy.

'Let us sit down here and think it over. The position is getting complicated.'

They sat down side by side, the sun shining on them, the wind careering round them.

Oliver Toope reached out his broad, brown

hand and took the little gloved one in his clasp.

'Muriel,' he said, 'I am afraid I am a troublesome sort of a fellow to you—one who would be jealous of his own father or brother, if he were alive; of anybody, in fact, who dared to say a word to you. And I don't suppose that I shall get much better of that complaint till you and I are man and wife. When is that to be?'

'Mercy, Oliver! is this your confidence, your secret, your clue?' cried Muriel, snatching her hand away in her astonishment; but it found its way back in a few moments of time.

'I am coming to that, dear; but I thought that we would fix this little matter first,' he answered.

'It's no little affair to think of marrying a big jealous booby like you,' said Muriel.

'No, it isn't,' was Oliver's grave reply. 'I'm an idiot, I know, and you are pretty and clever, and I don't deserve you a bit—but, still, here we are.'

'Yes—here we are!'

'And we may as well name the day and stick to it,' continued Oliver Toope. 'I don't see what we are waiting for.'

'We are waiting to hear of Claude Faremouth and James Horbury.'

'It is Claude that brings this subject forward.'

'Claude?'

'Yes. He wants to set me up in London—to become a partner with me in an engineering business, and he offers to find all the capital. Just the kind of good fellow so many people are always looking out for. Oh yes, he is one of the best of fellows.'

'When he does not keep me out late on the parade, Oliver,' she said demurely.

'Ah, we'll drop the subject, serious though it is, for another reason—desperately serious. But, there,' he said, 'I am ashamed of myself, and I have apologized, you know, humbly.'

'And here we are back to the night of Mrs. Faremouth's disappearance, which we will discuss in the first place, please. Business first, marriage afterwards, Oliver,' she said lightly. 'That is, on one of these fine days.'

They were in good spirits now. Mrs. Faremouth's troubles lay further back from their minds, and her troubles, after all, might be only of her own creating, and capable of a very mild solution. Why should it not end in the clear daylight, with all the suspicions swept away—those

ungenerous suspicions which seemed to attack everybody in turn, and implicate everybody, too?

'The fact is,' said Oliver, with a sudden abruptness that startled her, 'I wanted to be your lawful protector right off the reel, as they say, Muriel, so that I might be better able to fight your battles: yours and Claude's, for the matter of that,' he added.

'Why are you coupling our names together?' she asked. 'What battles of mine have you to fight? Out with it, Oliver; there is something more to tell me.'

'Well, there is.'

'Go on.'

'You are not likely to be scared? You are brave?'

'I shall not be scared, Oliver.'

'The police about here—and an extra addle-headed simpleton whom they have

sent down from Scotland Yard—are of opinion that you and Claude know where Mrs. Faremouth is. And,' he said, after a pause, 'are, in some way or other, answerable for her disappearance. There, I thought that would probably surprise you, little woman. It took the breath completely out of me when I first heard the rumour.'

'Yes, I am surprised,' Muriel confessed, tapping the tip of her little boot with her sunshade. 'Who set such an absurd rumour as this afloat?'

'I don't know. Who does set any rumour or scandal afloat, and how is it no one is able to catch the originator and choke him right off as a warning to others of the same species?' growled Oliver.

'Are they saying this in the town down there?' said Muriel, pointing to the pile of housetops in the depths below.

'A few of them are, at all events; and out of my hearing.'

'Try and remember everything they say of me, Oliver.'

'They say that you and Claude have been seen together more than once; that you came to Rossendale as a spy, in secret service for him; that you had exerted from the beginning a wonderful influence over Mrs. Faremouth; that she used to visit you in your room when the rest of the inmates were asleep; that you were the only one at Rossendale acquainted with the address of Claude Faremouth at Llanwyssander; that you brought Claude to Rossendale to take away his wife; that you were the last up in the house on the night when Mrs. Faremouth disappeared, and the first up in the morning before the house was astir.'

'A very pretty story,' Muriel murmured. 'And you knew all this?'

'And did not believe a word of it—knocked down one man—no, I think there were two went over—who talked of this at the Quarryman's Arms in the village we last passed through. But I see now how a parcel of prying fools have made their story out of nothing. I should like to wring their necks,' cried Oliver, in a fury.

'One story is good until another is told,' quoted Muriel, still very thoughtfully. 'It did not seem possible that I should be connected with this miserable mystery, and yet you see, Oliver, I am enmeshed.'

'Not a bit of it.'

'A woman under suspicion,' said Muriel. 'How strange—how dreadfully strange!'

'I did not intend to say a word about this,' said Oliver ruefully, 'and now it's all

come out in a damned lump. I beg pardon, I ought not to swear—but I'm savage.'

'A sincere Huron, Oliver.'

'What's that?'

'And you want to marry me right off to show your confidence in me,' she said, without replying to his question. 'Ah, that is like you, old Noll! And you may kiss me, if you like.'

Oliver did so immediately.

'There. Now, we will never talk again of marrying, or giving in marriage, until this scandal is crushed underfoot,' said Muriel firmly.

'Oh Lord!'

'Are we in the papers, Oliver?'

'Well, there's a little humbugging paragraph that nobody can make sense of in the *Storn's Head Observer and Visitors' List*, a general and admirable medium for all the

soap and pill makers and quack doctors in England. I have called three times at the office to see the editor,' he added, with his fists clenched, 'but the gentleman is always out. Lucky for him that he is.'

'Oliver, you'll get locked up presently, if you go on in this manslaughtering way,' she said. 'For mercy's sake do not interfere and make me the talk of the place. Leave me to consider how to act. Please do.'

'What is in your mind now?' he said doubtfully and anxiously.

'Oh, many things,' she said. 'Don't ask me what they are. Let us get down to the town. Take me home, Oliver.'

Muriel was strangely excited, and Oliver was equally bewildered. As they went down the grassy slope he took her arm and drew it within his own so that she might not slide

forward and fall, she walked on so rapidly. Presently he looked into her face.

'I am afraid it is all my clumsy want of tact—my fault altogether,' he said ruefully.

'No, no.'

'I ought not to have told you.'

'I am glad to know,' she answered.

They went on in silence after this, as silent as they had been when ascending the hill three-quarters of an hour ago. Going and coming they had both been tongue-tied.

At the bottom of the hill, and when they were on the white dusty road which wound round to Great Storn's Head, Muriel spoke again, and in a low voice:

'You have not been very explicit, Oliver.'

'As to what?'

'As to your motives for suspecting James Horbury.'

'Ah! I had forgotten that, thinking of

you. Well, Mrs. Faremouth was the possessor of a considerable amount of Indian bonds in her own right, Claude tells me,' he continued. 'Those bonds were sold by James Horbury, he has ascertained, some years ago, with or without the permission of Claude's wife. Probably without, as she was incapable of advising him. Now——'

'Don't tell me any more,' exclaimed Muriel, interrupting him. 'We are too suspicious—and unjust. I will not hear any more.'

'You asked me,' said Oliver, 'and this is, after all, Claude's story, not mine.'

'Yes, yes—I know. But don't say anything more about it,' she said. 'I think I understand.'

He glanced at her. She was hardly herself, and this was not the pretty girl whom he had taken for a long walk that September

afternoon. This was a grave, earnest-faced little woman, with two red spots burning into her cheeks, and her bright eyes looking far ahead of her, as at a shadowy form which haunted her almost, so steadfast was her gaze. And before she reached home a new fear altogether was upon her. The links in the chain were forging apace.

At a few yards from Rossendale a workman was standing with his hands in his pockets, as if waiting for someone. He was a short, thick-set, red-haired man, in white soiled moleskin, and he looked hard at Muriel and Oliver as they passed him.

When they were at the gate of Rossendale he came up to them at a quick pace.

'Do you live yonder?' he said, addressing Muriel, and nodding towards the house.

'Yes.'

'At Mr. Gladwell's?' he added, as if to make quite sure.

'Yes.'

'Will you give that to the master, please, and say Evan Evans found it on the hills. In the dip where the young oaks are.'

Muriel took from him the crimson plush tobacco-pouch, with the name of Gladwell flourishing across it in gold cord—the pouch she had seen in James Horbury's hands on the night Mrs. Faremouth stole away—the pouch that he had tossed on to the hall table along with his briar pipe.

'The man is always pitching that flashy thing about,' remarked Oliver, recognising the article.

'Tell him, please, lady, that I found it a week or so ago, but that my business ain't lain in this direction, or I'd have come on with it sooner. He'll not forget me when

he sees me. Evan Evans 's my name, tell him, lady. I have taken every care of it. Good-day.'

The man nodded and slouched away, and Muriel stood with the crimson pouch in her hand. Suddenly she turned to Oliver.

'Follow him! Find out where that man lives, Oliver, and the place, the day, the date—exact—when he picked it up,' said Muriel, wildly excited now.

Then she ran into the house and tore upstairs to her room, and Oliver Toope proceeded at once to carry out her behests.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BECOMING CONFIDENTIAL.

Locked securely in her own room, Muriel Reeves tried hard to solve the new problem which had been suggested to her by the losing and finding of such an every-day article as a plush tobacco-pouch. A careless hand and a pocket of insufficient depth, and anything might easily be lost.

'The pouch had been lost before,' Oliver said.

At first sight one does not see anything problematic in it, but Muriel's memory was keen for details, though her mind was per-

plexed by all that Oliver Toope had told her that day in his wandering fashion. That crimson pouch had been thrown on to the table in the hall when she and Claude Faremouth were talking to James Horbury; she remembered Claude's eyes glancing towards it, and she wondered at the time if the name 'Gladwell,' which was strikingly distinct in gold cord, would suggest to Mr. Faremouth the lying cognomen the master of Rossendale had taken to himself. It was a red spot of colour in the dim light, she remembered, too—and yet it was odd that the remembrance of it all came so clearly back to her just then. When did that red-haired quarryman, Evan Evans, find that pouch which she held in her hand? On what early morning was it? If he could only recollect—if he would tell Oliver—what a deal might depend upon it in the near

future. What an awful truth might leap forth from the shadows to scare them, and what deeper hues it might take unto itself!

James Horbury's one solace was his briar-wood pipe—it was seldom away from those thin lips of his; he was a smoker of the deepest dye, and Muriel felt that she had not seen him fill his pipe from the plush pouch from the day that Mrs. Faremouth had disappeared. She felt sure of that, though so small a matter had not attracted her attention before, and that by way of substitute she was suddenly conscious of a new purse-like pouch, with a steel clasp which shut with a sharp snap, and which James Horbury was snapping twenty times a day. And this crimson pouch was found upon the hills where James Horbury never went now for his morning walks. If this article in her hands were picked up in the

early morning of the day following Mrs. Faremouth's disappearance, James Horbury must have been on the hills that memorable night alone, or with Claude Faremouth's wife, the woman lured from home perhaps by some specious pretext, some cruel, wicked lie—some pretended message from the man for whom her heart was yearning, a story of his illness possibly, or his urgent wish to see her for one moment, just one moment before the morrow, when he would come to claim her.

Yes, we are aware that very close to the truth were the thoughts of this keen-witted young woman, who was trying hard not to believe the worst, for all her marshalling together of the grim facts which might end another life if this were murder. No, no; God forbid that it should be murder, that there was anyone so base as to begrudge the

life of a poor fragile woman, or so villainous as to seek the opportunity to take it. Not so bad as that, Muriel hoped. James Horbury might by some strange deception have persuaded his sister-in-law to seek another retreat away from Rossendale, and there need be no appalling crime to account for her sudden disappearance. She prayed there might not be, with all her heart.

Meanwhile, what should she do with the pouch with the false name of Gladwell flourishing thereon in letters of gold; strange testimony to James Horbury's want of veracity at the very least? What should she do? The first impulse was to say nothing about it—to keep it as a secret that any property of James Horbury's had been found upon the hills, and so for awhile await results. But, meanwhile, she would be in possession of an article that did not belong

to her; she might be even accused of the theft of it, and this Evan Evans was likely to meet James Horbury at any moment, and hint that he was deserving of reward for the discovery of the pouch, and taking the trouble to come to Rossendale to deliver it to its lawful owner, like the honest man that he was. And the man would say that he had given it to a young lady, whom James Horbury would know to be Muriel Reeves.

No, she would not keep it. She would return it to James Horbury at dinner-time, or before, or after dinner; she was not quite certain which; but she would watch her opportunity and him, and see what would follow, and in what manner he would behave under the circumstances. But the best laid plans will go agley; James Horbury was not to be surprised or trapped so easily. At dinner-time there was no place reserved for

him, and it was left for his wife and Muriel to do honour to the feast. Mr. Gladwell, as Muriel was informed, was dining with some friends at the Imperial Hotel, and would not be at home till a late hour. Friends from London had been met on the parade, and James had accepted their invitation to dinner.

'They were anxious that I should join them, too,' Mrs. Horbury condescended to explain to our heroine; 'but I had not the heart—neither the heart nor the strength,' she added, with a long, deep sigh.

Muriel could only reply to this in a conventional way by expressing the hope that both would come right in time.

'My husband had some little objection to going himself,' she said further; 'for these are early days for anything like festivity. But they are old friends, and I

thought the change would do James good. And he likes change so much.'

Muriel had no doubt of it, but she made no comment. There was nothing that called for reply, and Lavinia continued in her desultory way :

'I am always anxious that James should have as much change as possible,' she said. 'He is tied to me and home so constantly, and I am, I fear, occasionally exacting. And he is not himself just now. My sister's disappearance has affected him more than you can possibly imagine, Miss Reeves. He has fits of terrible despondency ; he lies awake for hours, staring at the ceiling in the most objectionable way, and it gives me a turn if I wake suddenly and find him looking up like that. When he sleeps he dreams of Gertrude, and calls out her name.'

'Indeed !'

'You would not think all this weighed upon him so much, for he is the same as ever in company,' said Lavinia; 'but oh, dear! when he is alone he is a great trial to me.'

'Indeed!'

'Don't keep saying "Indeed," Miss Reeves!' cried Mrs. Horbury fretfully. 'It fidgets me to find you so extremely apathetic. Sometimes I wish you would show more interest in our grief—say something, suggest something; but you are always so very silent.'

'I do not know whether I have a right to intrude with any suggestion of my own,' replied Muriel, 'or whether anything that is worth suggesting occurs to me. It is all inscrutable to me.'

'Does James ever speak of it to you?'

'No, madam.'

'It is a sorry subject. He says very little to me, because he thinks it worries me to dwell upon it—as if I can help worrying—help thinking of a calamity like that! Not that he will call it a calamity,' said the wife, 'despite his great depression.'

'What does Mr. Horbury call it?'

'He affects to treat it lightly, as though I did not know that it was all put on for my sake. Dear James! he is one of the worst actors I have known,' Lavinia ran on. 'He jests at it, tries to turn it into ridicule; says it is a little tiff—an exhibition of Gertrude's temper, or, at the worst, a wish to get rid of us and set up in life away from us, with a husband who especially dislikes my own.'

'Would not Mrs. Faremouth have written to you under those circumstances?'

'That is what I say. Gertrude and I

have always been good friends. I have tended her as a sister should do; I have kept her away for years at my own risk and peril—in defiance of the law, even—from those dreadful lunatic asylums, of which we hear such tales; and this is the return she makes to me. I should not have thought it of Gertrude.'

'It appears to me unlikely that Mrs. Faremouth should have acted so ungenerously,' Muriel replied, as Mrs. Horbury evidently, on this occasion, waited for an answer.

'It is unlike her general manner, do you mean?'

'Unlike her character.'

'What could you have known of her character in those two days you had been with us, Miss Reeves?'

'Very little,' was the reply. 'But it struck

me that she had been a thoughtful, earnest woman before the time of her affliction.'

'She was.'

There was a silence of several minutes' duration, during which Muriel felt certain that Mrs. Horbury was regarding her very critically. Was the lady disposed to submit her to a rigid cross-examination on that particular evening, and had she received instructions from her husband to do so? It was a new suspicion which came into Muriel's head, and it was not weakened by Mrs. Horbury's next inquiry.

'Muriel, will you do me a favour?' she asked very impulsively, and leaning across the table with her hands clasped together, almost as if in supplication.

The dinner was finished, but the servants had not come in since the coffee. Muriel was startled by her mistress's eagerness. It was

the first time that she had been called Muriel by Mrs. Horbury, who was generally formal and reserved, unless disturbed by one of those little exhibitions of temper which troubled her at times. She was not of her husband's familiar disposition.

Muriel hesitated. It seemed a rash proceeding to promise anything on the spur of the moment to the Horburys. There was no guessing what favour might be asked by these eccentric and exacting folk.

'If I can in any way, without——' she began in a stammering manner, which aggravated her as well as Mrs. Horbury.

'Ah! you will not promise. I was afraid you would not.'

'I shall be glad to hear first what it is you require of me,' said Muriel, with less embarrassment.

'You are an extremely cautious young woman,' said Mrs Horbury satirically.

'I have not the character of being so.'

'Secretive, too,' continued the mistress; 'not telling me what is in your thoughts—what you think of James, or me, or of that poor woman who has run away from us.'

'It is not my place to speak.'

'Perhaps not,' was the short answer. 'Let us go into the drawing-room.'

When they rose Mrs. Horbury linked her arm in that of Muriel, but whether for support or in a sudden sisterly fashion, it was not easy to determine. In the drawing-room, on the other side of the spacious hall, she sat down in an easy chair by the fire, which was burning in the steel grate that night. The season was not far advanced, but Mrs. Horbury was always chilly.

'Sit there by my side,' she said, indicat-

ing a chair close to her own, 'just as if we were great friends. Sometimes I think that I should be very, very glad of such a friend as you might prove to me.'

She rested her thin hand on Muriel's, and looked at her companion with a strange wistfulness. Muriel was on guard, but she was touched; she felt tears rising to her own eyes suddenly, despite her self-command. This was not hypocrisy on the elder woman's part; rather an approach towards a better understanding between them, a sign of that womanly yearning for friendship, confidence, deep affection, which one woman has for another, sometimes — not very often, possibly.

After all, and despite an array of town acquaintances, Lavinia Horbury, better known as Mrs. Gladwell, was desperately friendless.

'Yes, very glad of a friend,' she repeated, 'for I am much alone and in need of sympathy—even of moral support, for, God knows, I am far from a good woman.'

'In what way can I be of any service to you?' asked Muriel, 'and in the little time that I have to spend with you here?'

'Yes—you are going away. I forgot,' she answered sadly. 'Just as I begin to like you, because I feel that you are honest, for all your slyness.'

Muriel was considerably astonished at this sequel to the compliments Mrs. Horbury was disposed to lavish upon her that evening, and drew her hand away indignantly.

'Slyness!' Muriel repeated.

'I beg your pardon. I am too quick with my tongue,' Lavinia said hurriedly, 'and that has turned so many people against me—perhaps Gertrude. For nobody makes

allowance for my being so weak and ill and irritable, except James; and he bears with me, after a fashion. You are offended now?'

'No, madam.'

'That is so good of you. You are not quick to take offence, or you are very forgiving, which is about the same thing. And,' she added, suddenly reverting to the old subject of discussion, 'you will do me this one favour—the first and the last, probably, that I shall ever ask you?'

'And it is?'

'That you should tell me—now that we are together and not likely to be interrupted by James—all that Mrs. Faremouth said when she came upstairs to your room on the night before she went away. Pray tell me—so much depends upon it!'

CHAPTER XXIV.

SPEAKING HER MIND.

Muriel still hesitated to comply with Mrs. Horbury's wishes, and hardly knew for what reason it was that she should pause. It was not a great deal to do, but the woman who had disappeared had asked her to keep silence, and the remembrance of that injunction was strong upon her still.

'I should have no objection, Mrs. Horbury——'

'Don't call me by that horrible name,' she interrupted. 'You know that I am Mrs. Gladwell here. You must do it to annoy me.'

'Before the servants I say Gladwell, but I thought you might prefer in private to be addressed by your proper name.'

Lavinia shook her head.

'It is a name that we had in America, and we had hoped to set it aside here for good,' she said. 'It was always associated with our misfortunes, and we were glad to change it. We had many reasons for doing so.'

So that Claude Faremouth might not be able to trace them was one of the reasons, Muriel believed, but she did not say as much to the speaker.

'As Mr. Faremouth always addressed you as Horbury,' said Muriel, 'I thought that I might venture to follow his example.'

'Well, well; call us what you please,' she said, irritably again. 'After all it only makes a few people talk. But that is not

your business. It is—but you were going to tell me what my sister said to you that night. You have no objection; you said so, Muriel, did you not? Pray go on.'

The old anxiety to know everything had returned. She was very anxious, even erratic in her suppressed excitement, Muriel considered. But Mrs. Horbury was not frequently in the same mood for ten minutes together.

'Personally, I am very willing to give you the particulars of my interview with Mrs. Faremouth,' said Muriel, 'but I was asked to keep silence concerning it.'

'By Claude?'

'By Mrs. Faremouth.'

'And you promised?'

'No, madam; I did not.'

'Where lies the objection to tell me, then?'

'I think that Mrs. Faremouth was chiefly anxious that I should not speak of her return to sanity before she had had an opportunity of doing so herself — nothing more than that.'

'Then you will tell me?'

'Yes.'

There was not a great deal to relate, Muriel found when she had begun her story, and she could not see that any possible harm—or good—could result from its recapitulation. But it was a recital scarcely flattering to the Horburys, for Muriel spoke of Gertrude Faremouth's doubts of them, and of her intimations to Muriel to seek her husband, Claude, and tell him where she was if she fell mentally ill again before they met.

Mrs. Horbury listened with rapt attention—starting once or twice at certain por-

tions of the narrative, and once drawing her right hand across her eyes as though brushing tears away which came in spite of her; but when Muriel had concluded, she said listlessly —or with an attempt to appear listless:

'Is that all?'

'Every word, so far as I can recollect.'

Mrs. Horbury reflected, looked at the fire, and then at Muriel.

'Did she say anything concerning some bonds or India stock, or allude to her monetary affairs in any way?' she asked, suddenly.

'No, madam.'

'Not a word?'

'Not a word.'

'Mistrusting us a little, and not quite sane, even, it seemed just possible to me that she might have told you how or in what way she had disposed of them before her

sad affliction. She certainly sold a great deal of stock then—we have proof of that.'

Muriel thought of Oliver Toope's suspicions, fostered as they had been by Claude Faremouth, of Mr. Horbury's dealings with his sister-in-law's property ; but she hazarded no remark. The money side of the question —if there was a money side—did not interest her. It was a past sordid story, a sealed book. If the Horburys had lived and thrived on Mrs. Faremouth's bonds that was a matter between Claude and the Horburys—a miserable matter, too. But it did not account for a missing woman, and that was the secret which was oppressing Muriel and filling her with new, wild fears with every minute on the dial, every swing of the pendulum of the big old clock in the hall outside the door.

Mrs. Horbury was quick to detect Muriel's

lack of interest in the subject. If she had been asked by her husband to extract as much information from Muriel as was possible during his absence—to ascertain what Muriel Reeves knew and did not know—she had succeeded in her object, unless the young woman was very cunning indeed. She had told Muriel that she considered her sly, but she hardly meant what she had said. She had a higher opinion of Muriel Reeves than her husband had, for he was almost certain that the companion was a spy—Claude Faremouth's spy — who had got smuggled into the house by means for which he was quite unable to account—by magic, perhaps, for it seemed like it to his distorted fancy.

Muriel had a certain impression on her mind now that she was being 'drawn out' —'pumped,' Oliver Toope would have called

it—by Mrs. Horbury, but as regarded Mrs. Faremouth's interest in her, she had nothing to conceal, and there was nothing that required concealment. The strange coincidence that had made Oliver Toope and Claude Faremouth friends abroad might look like a fixed design, but it had been very easy to explain if, on the Horbury side, it was rather hard to credit. It was a simple solution, and it troubled not Muriel in any degree. Her one thought was, what had become of that fair, fragile woman who had been drawn towards her, who had asked for her help, given her her confidence, spoken of her brighter life to come, and then vanished like a dream-figure? That was a subject on which Muriel could grow eloquent, and that was uppermost again before Mr. Horbury's home-coming.

'I think my sister misjudged us,' said

Mrs. Horbury, after what seemed to be a long study of the flickering coals in the grate. 'Thought she would be better with her husband, Claude, and so stole away before any opposition could be offered to her plans. And we have thought—James and I—that you had aided her to get away—a supposition which you will forgive us on account of our anxiety and perplexity, will you not?' she asked, taking Muriel's hand again.

'I have nothing to forgive, madam,' answered Muriel; 'in uncertainty, one thinks of everything that is unreal, abnormal and uncharitable. One knows not what to think.'

'Yes; that is true. It is all incomprehensible to me and you, to my husband, and to everybody who has given a thought concerning it. There are times even,' she added, with a visible shudder, and her hand

closing more firmly upon Muriel's, 'when I fear that she has been made away with!'

Muriel's hand held Mrs. Horbury's more tightly in her turn, and the elder woman was quick to note its significance.

'Ha! you think so, too! You do — you do!'

'At times it steals across me that this is the end of it all,' murmured our heroine.

'And yet you have spoken to-night of her coming back to us!'

'I have hoped against hope.'

'Then you think the worst? You really think the worst, Miss Reeves?'

What induced Muriel to own to a belief in the worst was not apparent in that hour. She was over-wrought; she had forgotten the weakness of her mistress, and she was

seized with a desire to speak which was beyond her power to restrain. If she had been prompted by a hidden, unseen force at her side to say all that was in her mind—suddenly and without restraint—she could not have acted with less unreserve.

'Mrs. Horbury, I think the very worst,' Muriel said.

'Oh, Heaven ; my sister—poor Gertrude ! You think so ; that she is made away with ! Murdered, do you mean ?' Lavinia Horbury almost shrieked.

'I believe it is murder,' answered Muriel, with quivering lips and flashing eyes.

'Oh ! don't say that ! For the love of God, don't say it !'

And Mrs. Horbury rose and threw herself face foremost on the couch, and broke forth into passionate sobs and wailings.

Muriel started up to discover that there

was a third person in the room, standing close at her side, in evening dress, and with a face as white as his tie. It was Mr. James Horbury, alias Gladwell, of Rossendale.

CHAPTER XXV.

DIGNITY OR IMPUDENCE?

At what time James Horbury had opened the door and come into the drawing-room—how much or how little he had heard of the dialogue between his wife and Muriel—Muriel never knew. It was strange that she had not heard his footsteps, but she had been sitting with her back to the door, and Mrs. Horbury's last plunge into excitement and physical prostration had absorbed her attention till she had caught sight of him. Then it was a very pitiable figure which she confronted, his face aghast with consternation.

'What are you talking about, you two?' he said, in a thick, choking voice. 'Murder! Who do you think is murdered, Miss Reeves? Pray let me know. Murder is always an interesting subject.'

The words were cynical enough, but, croaked forth as from the throat of a raven, the satire was scarcely perceptible. James Horbury was as scared as his wife, and he had to steady himself by clutching at the back of a chair in order to preserve a dignified attitude. But that might have been from the effects of champagne and not from consternation; he might have dined unwisely, as he was in the habit of doing occasionally.

Mrs. Horbury was seated upright on the sofa again. The sound of her husband's voice had brought her round more effectively than any efforts of her companion

could have done, and she sat regarding the new-comer with streaming eyes, and a face that twitched and quivered with emotion.

'Oh, James, I am so glad you have come home,' she whispered; 'I have missed you so much! I have been so terribly tried!'

'By Miss Reeves?' he asked sharply, and with more firmness in his voice.

'Yes. But it is not her fault—not altogether, that is,' she said faintly. 'I—I forget whose fault it is. But we were talking of Gertrude—our poor Gertrude—and Miss Reeves said that—that she thought my sister had been murdered.'

'What an assertion to make to a poor invalid to whom perfect freedom from excitement is recommended by the faculty,' cried Horbury; 'great Heaven, how kind, how considerate, how womanly!'

He had recovered from his surprise, his

terror, and was dignified and scornful now; his voice rang out imperatively; his eyes blazed with a new fury. He was roused almost to frenzy by the picture of his wife's prostration; his virtuous indignation was a fine sight to witness at this moment.

'James, pray be calm,' said Mrs. Horbury; 'I cannot bear a scene. I do not think Miss Reeves is to blame very much. I can hardly understand how we came to talk of murder,' she added, with a perceptible shudder, and her teeth rattling together.

'It passes comprehension,' exclaimed her husband, throwing up his hands in his complete amazement. 'It is beyond me altogether. If this be the duty of a companion, Heaven preserve you, Lavinia, from such companionship as this ever again!'

Muriel Reeves gathered herself together, and looked James Horbury in the face. He

had thrown down the gauntlet and it was war between them. All his suavity and forced politeness, his smiles and bows, his easy air of patronage and familiarity, were things of the past. He had another character to assume; he had chosen his time well, he thought, and here was an excellent opportunity to quarrel with her. At first blush, even, one could imagine that he was very much in the right. All his friends would say that he was, and that it was not an excuse to get Miss Reeves as speedily as possible out of the house. Not that she wished to remain, he knew; not that his wife had asked her to stay till she was stronger; but he should breathe so much more comfortably when she was clear of Rossendale. This Muriel Reeves was highly dangerous, and he was afraid of her. He should know no peace of mind till she was

gone. There was an inquiring look in her clear eyes which he could hardly face, let him try never so hard. She seemed to read him like a book, to guess all that was in his thoughts, all that he had planned and carried out. From the beginning to the end of her stay at Great Storn's Head she had been a curse upon him. If she were gone, it would be well. If she were dead, so much the better.

'I was pressed by Mrs. Horbury for my opinion of the cause of Mrs. Faremouth's absence, sir. I had no wish to speak. I am sorry that I have done so, for Mrs. Horbury's sake.'

'It is too late for an apology,' he said sharply.

'I am not apologizing to you, sir, scarcely to Mrs. Horbury, who has forced this question upon me,' answered Muriel.

'Yes; it was my fault,' confessed the weak woman; 'it was my fault chiefly. James, I hope you will not say a word more.'

'On the contrary, I have a great many words to say.'

'When I ask you to be silent,' she said, reproachfully; 'when you know how weak I am, how sorely tried I have been?'

'I am very sorry, my dear, but still, I am more curious than sorry,' he said obstinately.

'James, you have had too much champagne at dinner, or you would never talk like that to me,' said his wife.

'I do not drink to excess. I know what I am about,' was his confident reply.

'If you do, you will not seek to distress me by this dreadful subject,' said Lavinia Horbury.

'I would seek to convince you of the absurdity of Miss Reeves's theory,' he answered. 'It would ease your mind to know how cruel and unjust an assertion it is.'

'I assert nothing, Mr. Horbury, for I know nothing,' said Muriel.

'Then why do you say that Mrs. Faremouth has been murdered?'

'I think so,' said Muriel very firmly.

'Without any proof, you dare to think so?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'It is not easy to explain,' Muriel replied; 'and before Mrs. Horbury I would pefer not to say another word.'

'Lavinia,' said James Horbury, turning to his wife, 'would you mind withdrawing to your room? It would be so much the better for you, it would indeed, my dear.'

'Very well; I think it will,' said Mrs. Horbury feebly; 'if you and Miss Reeves have this painful subject to discuss, if you think it necessary, absolutely necessary, it is kind of both of you to spare me. Yes, I will go to my room.'

'Let me see you upstairs, Lavinia,' he said solicitously. 'Pray lean upon my arm.'

'No; I am not so weak as that. Do not leave me long to myself, James, and pray do not be too harsh with Miss Reeves. She means all for the best. She has been very kind to me to-night, and so communicative. Good-night, Miss Reeves.'

'Good-night, madam.'

Lavinia Horbury walked slowly across the room as if reluctant to withdraw, or doubtful what would follow her withdrawal; and she looked almost entreatingly at her

husband, as he stood with his fingers clutching the handle of the door which he had opened to allow of her egress.

He did not meet her gaze; on the contrary, avoided it scrupulously, and with one more furtive glance at him, she went away.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ALTERCATION.

Mr. Horbury closed the door, hesitated as if the idea of locking it had occurred to him, and then sauntered towards Muriel and took a seat opposite her.

Muriel Reeves was standing with one hand upon the mantelpiece, watching carefully his movements. Had the key turned in the lock she would have rung the bell for the servants; this was not a gentleman to be trusted implicitly—rather one to be trusted not at all, she thought.

'Sit down, Miss Reeves, please.'

Muriel would have preferred to stand, but thus adjured, she sat down in the chair which she had quitted to go to the support of Mrs. Horbury. She did not admire the position. She was not prepared for a scene; she was a little nervous, although far from dismayed. In a certain way she felt that she was in the wrong, that she had not acted judiciously, that it might have been wiser and kinder to have held her peace with Mrs. Horbury; but it was as if she had been urged to the avowal, and she was hardly sorry for it. There was something satisfactory in having spoken out at Rossendale, where people did not say what they thought, and thought ill of one behind their smiles. And if all this expedited her departure from Great Storn's Head she should be glad enough presently.

Mr. Horbury did not begin his reproaches

immediately; he appeared to be studying his attack, preparing his vocabulary, by the way his lips moved, as if repeating a lesson to himself that it was necessary to know by heart before he launched forth. He was strange, and he looked strange, and Muriel was not quite certain that it was safe to be alone with him.

He began at last, but his imperative mood had departed from him, and he was simply grave and stern, assuming the air of a man who, being very much in the right, was determined to make the most of the position.

'You think my sister-in-law was murdered?' he said.

'Yes,' was the laconic answer.

'What has given you that desperate impression, and why have you thought it necessary to shock my wife by a statement

so cruel and so rash?' he said. 'You may speak freely. I will not be harsher than I can help, I will remember you are a lady, and that I am a gentleman.'

'I do not know that you have a right to demand an explanation from me, Mr. Horbury,' was the reply; 'but as it may bring about explanations on both sides, it may be as well to tell you the fears which I have had.'

'And which you have certainly communicated to Mrs. Horbury.'

'Which I have kept back until to-night, fearing that I might be wrong, might do harm, might bring about much unhappiness by a chance word that could never be recalled,' continued Muriel. 'But Mrs. Horbury accused me of having a suspicion which she had already formed in her own mind——'

'What is that you say?' he interrupted.

'Which she had already formed in her own mind,' Muriel repeated; 'that her sister had been made away with. And my answer was that my own belief was hers.'

James Horbury sat back, and planted his hands upon his knees, and Muriel saw that his hands were trembling, despite their rigidity of clutch.

'My wife did not speak just now as if she had had such a suspicion. She charged you with it, that was all.'

'I am aware of that.'

'You did not accuse her before me of such a statement.'

'I had no right to accuse her. I did not wish to prolong a painful subject, seeing how deeply it had affected her already,' answered Muriel.

'You were considerate at the eleventh hour,' he said, with a perceptible sneer.

'It was better to say no more.'

'I have not heard my wife express any suspicion of a crime,' he went on. 'She has attributed the departure of her sister to a sudden wish to leave us, to an offence which she might have taken in the evening after you had left us, and when a little difference arose.'

'I was not aware of any difference.'

'Mrs. Horbury did not tell you?'

'No.'

'But for my wife to think that Mrs. Faremouth had not left us of her own free will is a revelation to me, or an attempt at deception which, from motives of your own, I am unable to fathom.'

'What motives am I likely to have?'

'It is impossible to say, but candidly I have been for some time suspicious of you, Miss Reeves.'

'I am not surprised,' said Muriel.

'You have acted very strangely; you were in secret communication with Mrs. Faremouth directly after your arrival here, ostensibly as a stranger to us all,' he continued. 'Mr. Faremouth, whom we thought dead, appears at the same time as yourself; he comes to this house with Mr. Toope, but only as Mr. Toope's friend; he meets you on the parade next night; he is brought back by you at a late hour, with a demand to see his wife. And I have thought—and have not been alone in my thought—that it is you who can account for Mrs. Faremouth's disappearance, and that only you and her hot-headed husband can solve the mystery when you are disposed to be merciful and relieve our natural anxiety.'

'It is a strong indictment. But we are endeavouring to solve the mystery—both of

us,' answered Muriel quietly. 'Mr. Faremouth rests not night or day.'

'Indefatigable man,' was the scornful reply.

'And it is fair to him to state that he does not believe in any injury to his wife. It is only I with whom the suspicion rests very strongly; that will not go away, that will be ever with me unless the truth comes to light. The ungenerous thoughts which you have of me, Mr. Horbury,' said Muriel indignantly, 'do not affect me much, knowing how absurd they are, and how singularly unreal you will consider them to-morrow. I may have ungenerous thoughts of you, but I will do you the justice, sir, to keep them to myself.'

Muriel spoke with dignity, and he eyed her critically and half-admiringly, despite his intolerable fear of her. It was the first time

that she had spoken out fully, although not the first that had assured him she was a young woman of spirit and energy—one who could take her own part excellently well.

If Lavinia had been only like her, as firm and as self-possessed, and as good-looking, life would have been very different with him. It was remarkable that such ideas should cross him in the midst of his vituperations, but they did in a wild, purposeless way; had he had too much wine, after all? was it probable?

One phrase of her last speech stuck to him, even perplexed him. His thoughts of her, she had said, were 'singularly unreal,' and he would think them so to-morrow. What did she mean by that?

Why to-morrow? What was that woman about to assert that she spoke with that in-

sufferable air of conviction? Did she think that he was not perfectly sober, despite his gravity of demeanour, and were the wiser reflections to follow with the clearer condition of his faculties? He knew that his charges were unreal—that they were utterly and disgracefully false—but he had hoped to crush her with the weight of them. They had been massed together skilfully, and they should have fallen upon her with considerable force; but they seemed to rest like snowflakes upon her. She did not attach any importance to them, and all his eloquence—and he was sure that he had been eloquent and forcible—had failed to affect her. He had expected indignation and trepidation and entreaty and many tears; and after that he might have taken her into his forgiving arms and pressed a chaste kiss upon her cheeks—he should have liked to kiss her, he thought

suddenly, in that irrelevant way which was distracting him a little to account for—and the old resolution to get rid of her at any sacrifice, by any scheme, might have dissolved itself into the mists. If she were friendly—if she were only friendly or affectionate, as some companions of his wife had been, and the wife never a bit the wiser—bless Lavinia for her singular obtuseness!—if Muriel Reeves had been more like the ordinary run of subordinate women whom he had known! But she was not. She was 'one too many for him,' he owned to himself; it must be daggers drawn between them, or she must get away quickly from his life. She distressed it, cast an ugly black shadow upon it, cursed it with strange doubts. A most objectionable girl.

He answered her at last, and in the

haughty manner in which he had commenced his evening lecture.

'I can see no further object in prolonging the discussion,' he said. 'You are obstinate, contumelious, and have no apology to offer for your treatment of the poor invalid whom I left in your charge. You assert your own convictions and despise mine, and under the circumstances, I think it would be better that you leave Rossendale to-morrow morning, Miss Reeves.'

'I shall only be too delighted to go,' replied Muriel.

'Your coming here has been a complete failure.'

'It has, sir—it has, indeed,' said Muriel, in so joyful a tone that it became a fresh surprise to Mr. Horbury. The whole night had been full of surprises, for that matter, and there were one or two more to come!

She had risen now, and Mr. Horbury had followed her example. There was no use in continuing a conversation with a young woman so obdurate as this. Still, he was anxious to get behind the mask, to find out, if possible, what was lying dormant, or active, in the recesses of her mind.

'That is settled, then, and there is no reason why we should not part the best of friends, merely acknowledging that incompatibility of temperament has not led to things running on as smoothly at Rossendale as both of us could have wished,' he said; 'but may I put one more question to you before we say good-night?'

'I would rather not have further questioning to-night,' said Muriel restlessly.

'Just one, Muriel?' he said in his insinuating manner again, and Muriel sadly longed to slap his face.

She remained silent, and he took silence for consent, and continued.

'I would be glad to know—I am sure both my wife and I would be extremely glad to know—what has given you the dreadful impression that Gertrude Faremouth has been made away with.'

'Do not ask me.'

'Surely we have a right to know?'

'It is more than one impression—one following another in a grim procession, one strengthening the other, link after link, in a chain,' she said.

'What do you think—what can you possibly think?'

'I have told you already that I fear Mrs. Faremouth has been murdered.'

'There exists not a single proof of such a theory. Where could she have been murdered? When? By whom?'

'On the hills—in the night-time—by the man who was with her!' said Muriel, advancing towards him and looking him closely in the face.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HOW MURIEL THOUGHT IT WAS DONE.

No, not a man of extraordinary nerve, or fertility of resource, was this James Horbury. Scarcely a born villain, but having had villainy thrust upon him, very possibly a man who under extremely favourable circumstances might have been a highly respected member of society, a bank director, or a brewer, or a bishop. He had been in the wrong groove from the first—a groove on the downhill line—and he had descended to Avernus with rapid facility; it is in the nature of things for such a man to sink.

But he was not a brave individual in resources—not even 'a cool card.'

Muriel's new manner was startling, and his careless vein fell all to pieces; he was hypnotized as it were by the flashing of her eyes, by the immobile features of an avenging foe, it might be an avenging angel, who had sprung up in that drawing-room. He had always been afraid of her—in doubt of what knowledge of him and his ways might be lurking behind the broad white forehead; and she had from first to last been an unknown quantity, a friend or a spy set to watch him and all his belongings. The colour died from his face again, and was replaced by an ashen gray; he could not stand any longer, and he fell back into an easy-chair as though she had shot him. And there he lay huddled together and staring at her, open-mouthed. He had never been

great at self-command—he had always detested surprises—he required time to make his preparations, to think what he should say or do, then he could hold his own with most men; but to be taken off his guard, to be doubtful of what might be the next move upon the board, or who might be lurking round the corner, was upon all occasions a distressing ordeal.

In the first moments of his consternation he was sure that everything had been discovered, that Muriel Reeves had known all for some time, and that he was completely in her power. What a fool he had been—what an outrageous and incompetent fool—to give himself airs, to assume the stern, virtuous taskmaster before the woman who knew the one great and awful secret of his life! What was to become of him, great God, if she did know!

If she really did know! That was his second and wiser thought. If this were only 'a try-on'—the mere guesswork of a sharp woman putting this and that together, and jumping to conclusions, as women will, just to see the effect which might be created by a lucky guess! Lucky—to think of calling such a horrible misadventure 'lucky'!

He sat and breathed hard; he gave a clutch at his white tie and tore it from his neck as though he were choking—it felt uncommonly like a halter round his throat—he was suffocating and could not speak; he wanted time to get cool and come round to his usual self. If she would only give him time!

She was moving to the door now, and he was powerless to arrest her by a word. She must not go away like that, leaving him in a suspense that was worse than knowing all

the truth. The truth—whatever it was—must be brought face to face with him, so that he could defy her, or sink down upon his knees and beg her to spare him from the awful consequences of his sin. She must not steal away satisfied that she had struck him down by her serpent's fangs, convinced that he had betrayed himself by a physical prostration that he could not by any possibility disguise, and which was not now easy to explain.

He put out a shaking hand, as if in entreaty ; he should be better and stronger in a moment, if she would not go away.

Muriel stopped and looked down upon him cowering there, as at some strange animal.

'Well ?' she said.

'One moment,' he gasped forth at last, and speech, having come to his rescue, now

leapt forth like a torrent; 'do not leave me; you have been so sudden, so awfully sudden, and I am not myself to-night. That's all. You know this; you took advantage of me. I am drunk, by God, I am! and you know it, and should not mind what I say. Have some charitable feeling towards me; some mercy! I feel as if I am going to die.'

'Shall I ask Mrs. Horbury to come down to you?'

'Oh no; for the Lord's sake do not send that helpless creature to me! I am ill, really ill; you have said such awful things! I never thought of murder—never dreamt of it,' he said, with one of those sudden rallies which were natural to him. 'Why do you overwhelm me by talking in this way, as though—as though you had seen a crime committed? What do you mean by

"on the hills—the man that was with her—the night-time"—anything? What do you mean by anything you say, and which is all so incomprehensible to me? Do you think I did it—I, of all men? Can you have the wickedness to think that?'

'I do not say so.'

'Do you think so? Can you possibly imagine that——'

'God forbid that I should judge any man.'

James Horbury breathed more freely. She did not know, or she would have the courage to tell him; it was all guess-work, mere supposition, just as he had imagined from the first. And yet, Heaven help him presently and in his dire extremity—how close it was to the truth! So very close that a chance word might bring about the crisis if she talked like that to other men.

'I cannot imagine what should have put such a morbid notion into your head,' he said feebly; 'it is so unjust.'

'It is always before me, as in a vision,' said Muriel.

Was she relentless in that hour, or resentful? It is not easy to say what was in the thoughts of Muriel Reeves, but she felt that she had James Horbury at a disadvantage, and that if he were the murderer of Gertrude Faremouth it was a mistaken charity to spare him. Such a monster was not deserving of pity, and who but a guilty man would have betrayed himself in this way, and shown the fear that was at the bottom of his cowardly heart? She would test him further—it was in her self-defence. Had he not said that she was accountable for his sister-in-law's disappearance, and charged her with being in league with

Claude Faremouth to spirit her away? Why should she spare a man who, knowing the truth, would cast the slur and shame of it upon others in his frantic desire to save himself?

'Before me as in a vision,' she continued slowly, 'is that night on which she went away. I see her stealing along the dark, deserted streets, in company with him who had determined on her life. They pass together from the town and ascend the great hills, the nearest way to Llanwyssander, where she had been told her husband lived, and was awaiting her. And then she is heard of no more!'

James Horbury's defence was beaten out of him; he had no more to say; he had not the courage to exchange another word with this malignant woman. He must have time to consider the position, to try and ascertain

what was the safest and wisest course to pursue. To-night he was absolutely powerless.

His look towards her seemed to suggest that he was conscious of his defeat, and would be glad to see her go; and Muriel left him without another word.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ASKING A FAVOUR.

When Muriel was in her own room she was conscious of the tobacco-pouch being still in the recesses of her pocket. She had taken it downstairs with the intention of restoring it to James Horbury, but James Horbury was not present at the dinner-table, and in the war of words which had followed his return home, Muriel had forgotten to allude to the discovery. Perhaps it was as well; it would have been almost to make a direct charge against James Horbury, and the pouch, after all, might have

been dropped upon the hills on a later occasion. Oliver Toope might know by this time, and possibly—she was far from certain of this—it was well that there had been no further conversation between her and the master of Rossendale.

But she would keep the tobacco-pouch no longer in her possession; let him have it, or destroy the evidence of it, if he chose, to the fact that here was another proof of his presence on the hills—a proof from which he had been spared a few minutes since. If he were guilty, let such a villain feel that his life was scarcely safe at Great Storn's Head now. She went out upon the landing-place again, stood and listened for a minute or two, made sure that he was moving about the house, and at last passing from the drawing-room down to his study; then she crept softly down, laid the pouch on the

sheepskin mat outside his bedroom, and hurried back to her room, and for extra precaution's sake drew her box across the door after locking herself in.

She did not feel so strong and self-possessed after that; the conflict was over, and she had issued from it victorious—with drums beating and colours flying metaphorically—but whether she had acted wisely she could not determine. She might have acted even rashly, and put James Horbury upon his guard; she would be scarcely sorry for that. She did not desire to place the rope round his neck, to be the means of tracking him to justice. She had resented his accusations against her by a counter-charge almost definite enough to brand him; but to be the means of bringing him to the scaffold was beyond her woman's wish. She did not know why there was a

certain sense of pity commingled with her loathing of him; and supposing that he should prove to be the murderer, but so it was at times, until the serious nature of the deed, its cruelty and utter selfishness, set her heart aflame with wrath once more. There was a deep feeling of commiseration in that heart even for Mrs. Horbury, who was weak and ill and loved the man—and the blow might fall some day more heavily upon her than upon all the rest. For the wife the blackness of night, to which could follow never a morning—the fate of wives sometimes. She came of an unhappy race, she had said once despondently to Muriel Reeves, and Muriel was disposed to believe it.

Muriel rose early, and began packing her box; it had been a sudden notice to quit, but she rejoiced at it exceedingly. She

should be glad to be free of the house and its belongings, and Mrs. Horbury would have no objection to see her depart now that the storm had broken forth, and there could follow no more peace. But Muriel was wrong in her surmise. Before breakfast Mrs. Horbury came into her room. She was agitated and nervous, as she was generally when anything unforeseen turned up at Rossendale, and she sat down by the window and began to cry.

'You know what I have come for, Miss Reeves,' she said, when she had recovered herself somewhat.

'I can probably guess,' was the reply; 'but I hope you will not begin the day, Mrs. Horbury, by fresh excitement—by new and imaginary troubles.'

'You are going away to-day? Mr. Horbury tells me so.'

'Mr. Horbury wishes that I should, and it is for the best—the best for all of us now,' Muriel added.

'But you don't think of me—nobody thinks of me!' Mrs. Horbury cried, wringing her hands; 'it is so unkind and selfish!'

'It is for the best,' Muriel said again, not knowing what else to say.

'How can it be for the best to leave me entirely alone here, with no one to take your place, at a time when I require so much comfort and support—when I have learned to like you as I have liked no other woman who has ever come to me before?' she cried. 'Do stay! Oh, pray don't run away like this!'

'It was understood that I should leave you in a few days, or a week at the utmost.'

'Yes, yes—I said so; but I thought that you would alter your mind when you began

to understand me and fall into my ways, and that we should be, oh, so happy by-and-by!'

Muriel did not see where the happiness was likely to come in, but she had had enough of controversy. If she had learned to like Mrs. Horbury a little, despite her faults and failings, and the unsatisfactory way she had of suddenly shifting her ground, as she had done last night after Mr. Horbury's return, still, she was a grave responsibility, exacting, irritable, and unjust. There was no reason why she should stop—every reason why she should depart—and she remained firm to all entreaties and promises and tears. Mr. Horbury had told her to go, and she would take him at his word.

'But Mr. Horbury—if you will persist in calling him Horbury, Muriel,' the mistress said, with tears still streaming down her cheeks, 'is going away to-day, and he

has no objection to your remaining with me.'

'No objection!' said Muriel, a little warmly.

'Just till he comes back—if you only will,' she entreated. 'He has a few days to spend in town on important business. His solicitors have wired, begging him to come to London, and if you leave me on the same day I shall be utterly alone. Oh, I shall not know what to do; it will kill me!'

Muriel was surprised.

'When does Mr. Horbury leave Great Storn's Head?'

'Directly after breakfast, by the 10.30 express,' she replied. 'A fly is coming to take him to the station. We breakfast half an hour earlier. Did I tell you this?'

'No.'

'I am so bewildered, I forget everything.

And you will stay, dear,' she urged, 'for a day or two longer, until I am accustomed to the thought of your deserting me—till Mr. Horbury comes back, or the day before he returns, say. Do stay till then, for the sake of the poor friendless mistress left alone here, and who knows not what to do —who is afraid, so terribly afraid, Muriel,' she added, with a strong shudder convulsing her whole frame, 'that something is about to happen that will wreck more lives than hers —something, oh, merciful Heaven, that I cannot stand against, and must sink under to my doom!'

'Doom, madam! what doom is there to fear?'

'God knows, I don't. But everything is so dark, and I am being shut in. If you are an earnest Christian, honest woman, don't desert me!'

Muriel relented.

'If—if Mr. Horbury is called away to London,' she said, 'and must leave at once, I will stay——'

'Till he returns,' she concluded for Muriel. 'Say till then?'

'I will stay till Saturday.'

'I am so much obliged—so deeply indebted to you. You have made me almost happy,' cried the strange woman.

Then she kissed Muriel suddenly and gratefully, and went from the room with a rapidity which astonished Muriel considerably.

When Muriel came down to breakfast she found Mr. and Mrs. Horbury already in the dining-room—Mrs. Horbury's eyes very red with the weeping of the previous half-hour, Mr. Horbury polite, smiling, and self-possessed. He said good-morning to Muriel,

and half rose with the intention of shaking hands with her, but he thought better of it, and sat down again. Once or twice he glanced furtively at her, but he did not attempt to engage in any conversation, his whole attention being devoted to his wife, who was very sad indeed.

'I cannot bear the thought of your leaving me,' she said; 'you are so seldom away, and you are all that is left to me.'

'Business, my dear Lavinia, business,' he replied. 'I am as sorry to go away as you are to part with me.'

'Bless you, James, for saying that!'

James gave a perceptible shiver under the blessing bestowed upon him, and then, as if to avoid further embarrassment, he turned quickly to Muriel.

'My good wife tells me that you have consented to stay with her till my return,

Miss Reeves,' he said. 'That is kind of you, and I thank you very much.'

Muriel inclined her head, but she did not answer him.

'Had I not been suddenly summoned away, I think it would have been better to keep to our original determination to part at once,' he said, more gravely; 'for we do not understand each other, and, I deeply regret to add, are not likely to do so. Misconceptions have arisen, strange views of affairs have been taken, remarkable ideas have been expounded, and we have no confidence in one another. But I am going away,' he added hastily. 'You will leave Rossendale before my return, and you will allow me to take this opportunity to apologize for anything hard or uncharitable I may have said last night to you, when—I blush to confess it—I was not quite myself. I trust, Miss

Muriel, that you will accept my apology. We shall not meet again—let us part friends.'

Muriel could but move her head slowly towards him again. She could not trust herself to speak—she did not know what she should be able to say if she made the attempt. All her eloquence had deserted her, and she was half inclined to wonder at her own courage and her own hard words of the preceding evening. Was it possible that this man was undeserving of her terrible doubts of him, and had she been too premature in her avowal of her suspicion?

He held his hand towards her, but she shrank away from it despite herself, and there was a frown upon his face for an instant at the repugnance which she was unable to disguise. But time was precious to him; the lawyers, he had told them, were expecting him to start from Wales by the

next train, and the fly was at the door to convey him to the station.

Mrs. Horbury drew out her handkerchief again, and Muriel, thinking it was better to leave husband and wife to themselves, departed hastily from the room. As the door closed, the invalid wife rose and put her arms affectionately round her husband's neck.

'Must you go, James, really?' she said, as though she doubted him at the last moment.

'My dear Lavinia, it is absolutely imperative that I should go; otherwise I should be too glad to remain, God knows,' he replied.

'And you will be home by Saturday?'

'Unless——'

'You promised to be back by Saturday, James,' she exclaimed. 'Don't put me off, pray—don't write and tell me you are going to stay away any longer. I hate that—I can't bear that!'

'Well, then, Saturday it shall be.'

'That will be only three days,' said Mrs. Horbury—'three clear days, and then you will be on your way to Rossendale again?'

'Only three days!'

He drew her to him, kissed her passionately, and then turned away with a face strangely convulsed. There were tears on his cheeks also, but he did not wish her to see them, or let her know how very weak he was. How strange that he should feel like this at the last, he who had been so strong-minded and masterful all the days of his life!

'For three days only, James, and then I shall see you again,' she repeated.

'Yes, yes; all right. God bless you!'

When he was in the fly she called out to him once more:

'Mind, James, only for three days!'

He nodded and smiled back at her, as if

in ratification of his promise; but when the fly had turned the bend of the road he sank back into its cushioned depths and hid himself away, covering his face with both hands.

'Only for ever!' he groaned.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A CHECKMATE.

Yes; James Horbury had made up his mind to leave Great Storn's Head, to disappear from Rossendale as completely and mysteriously as his sister-in-law had done—to leave home, wife, friends, and be heard of no more. It was a hard struggle with him, a poor result of all his scheming and unscrupulousness, but there was no other resource left. He was sure that Fate was hemming him in, and that his one chance was to be beyond reach and beyond recall.

Much had happened since last night even

which was not yet known at Rossendale, and he was not safe for a single instant. One mistake would bring about another, one clue would lead to another, until at last he should stand condemned and helpless in the midst of his accusers, with that woman Muriel Reeves pointing at him, and hissing out, 'I told you so!' He must get away. There was no hiding the truth for very long. He had been told that he was on the hills the night on which Gertrude Faremouth had disappeared, and no one could have guessed that fact, or that Gertrude was with him. Muriel must have followed him from the house that night, and for some hidden reason had preferred to torture him in lieu of charging him with murder. But she knew all, and he could not trust a woman. Every hour would be full of suspense and horror; and the crisis was close at hand when Muriel

Reeves would be compelled to come forward in spite of herself. Let him get away!

His first impulse had been to start off without a word; but that would be to cast suspicion on him before the time, and he only wanted time. To seek his solicitors in town was a very natural proceeding under any circumstances; it left a loophole for his return, should Fate not be too inexorable at the last, and despite his own dismal forebodings of the worst; it stopped people crying out for him, searching for him, speculating as to his whereabouts; it showed that he made no secret of his movements.

Muriel Reeves did not betray any astonishment, offer any opposition; her plans were not framed yet, probably there were others to consult, and the story of last night's altercation to be told, to be advised upon, before the irrevocable blow. His departure had

taken her off her guard instead of arousing fresh suspicions, and this was a problem not easy to be solved. He gave up the effort to do so; he did not know what was to follow next, he was dazed.

Here was a mystery, and he was baffled by it. And so let him get away, he said to himself again; it was the one thing left to do.

No one for a clear day would guess his intention, he thought, and at the end of that brief period he should be on his way to a new world and a new life, well provided with money, Mrs. Faremouth's money, most of it, a provision being left behind for his wife, whom he should be sorry to leave in any way destitute. He had planned for her future as well as he could; he hoped that was all right, although every plan of his had been a dismal failure from first to last,

opening with a fair prospect of success, and failing miserably in the end. Poor Lavinia! she would understand how necessary it was that he should get away, and she would become resigned in time to the loss of him, that is, if she lived long enough. She would forgive him all his trespasses against her; she had been long aware of the necessity which there had been for him to make use of Mrs. Faremouth's money to live, feeling sure that Mrs. Faremouth could have no further use for it in this world, and that no husband would ever find them, and come from America to claim it. Lavinia was a sensible woman, and would understand how he had been driven to extremity by Gertrude's coming once more into the possession of her faculties—a direful, dreadful extremity which he wished that he had not adopted; but which had seemed the

readiest way to get over all his little troubles. Lavinia would forgive even that; what was a sister's life in comparison with a husband's peace of mind and perfect security? Had he not plunged so wildly to save himself he would have been arrested for embezzlement, imprisoned and disgraced. It had seemed his one chance; but he wished now that he had been less rash, less bloody-minded, more of the ordinary scamp pattern. He was very sorry. He was still more sorry that he had not killed Muriel Reeves; there had been a chance even of that; but it foolishly had not occurred to him in good time. That would have been the card to play if he had only thought it out more carefully. There would have been some pleasure and satisfaction in it, and with his fingers round her white throat, what could she have done?

Was he quite sane, that he should have suddenly begun laughing at the complications which would have followed that manœuvre? The stir in the town, the sensation in the newspapers, the bewilderment in the countenance of the big bully of a fellow whom they called Oliver Toope—all this made him laugh as at a contingency which might have occurred, and which was now placed out of his power by his own absurd fastidiousness, or want of tact, or want of thought. Still, the possibilities of what might have been made him laugh as he stepped out of his fly into the railway-station.

That was his last laugh, the very last which it was ever his lot to indulge in. His sense of humour was destined to wholly evaporate, along with his sense of security, which had given him the opportunity of

smiling for a while longer as he jogged along in the fly, pondering over so many useless theories of his own, and bemuddled by so many speculations.

At the door of the fly, opening it to allow him to step forth into the open, was the identical Oliver Toope of whom he had just been thinking. The old adage. Talk of the devil, and here he was at his elbow. That devil Toope !

James Horbury was astonished, and he changed to his old gray colour again with marvellous celerity. His nerves were completely shattered, he thought, as he surveyed the stalwart young man standing before him, very red in the face, very short of breath, and very fierce of aspect. Oliver five minutes ago had caught sight of the fly and the portmanteau by the side of the driver, and of Mr. Horbury deep in the

recesses of the vehicle; he had been proceeding at a great pace towards Rossendale, impelled by startling news; but the sight of the equipage had changed his plan of action. A new thought, a new suspicion, and he had turned and given chase to the fly, keeping it well in view, and using his long legs to admirable advantage, and greatly to the amusement of various folk whom he had rushed by *en route.*

It was a dead heat, Oliver Toope and Mr. Horbury's fly coming in together, and here Oliver was face to face with James Horbury, the very man whom he was anxious to see, whom he was going to Rossendale to confront.

'What—what is it now?' said James Horbury, pushing his hat to the back of his head, and staring in a bewildered manner at Oliver.

'You are leaving the town, Mr. Gladwell —I should say, Horbury,' panted Oliver Toope. 'You must not do that.'

'Must not,' cried Horbury; 'who is to stop me? Who is to prevent me?'

'Neither to-day nor to-morrow shall you go away if I can help it. After that, it can be further considered.'

'I don't know what you mean,' said Horbury, recovering his self-possession, but still with his grayness of features strikingly apparent; 'I have not a minute to spare. I am telegraphed to come to London, and if you attempt to stop me I shall summon assistance and have you locked up.'

'You are aware that Claude Faremouth was arrested early this morning under suspicion of having caused the death of his wife?' thundered Oliver.

James Horbury hesitated before he replied.

He had known that all along; that was one reason for his getting well out of the way. Last night, when he had received private information that this was going to happen, he had thought that it was an excellent idea, an accident telling in his favour; now he feared that it would not only be an utter failure, but bring Muriel Reeves to the rescue, and wholly overwhelm him. He had hoped to begin his journey before the town was full of the news and to-morrow's examination before the magistrate took place—to leave the fuss and the bother and the horror of it a few miles behind him.

'Yes, I have heard of that,' he said at last, in reply to Oliver Toope's question.

'And yet you are leaving Great Storn's Head?'

'The examination before the magistrates will not take place to-day. I—I shall be

back to-morrow,' he stammered. 'I have pressing business in town, and cannot be detained.'

'Claude Faremouth is a prisoner,' said Oliver sternly.

'Serve him right. He knows what has become of his wife. He has been following her with malicious intent for the last five years. I can prove that,' cried James Horbury.

'You must stop and prove it, Mr. Horbury,' said Oliver. 'You cannot run away with all this valuable evidence against him. It is your duty to remain.'

'I shall be back to-morrow.'

'Then I will go with you and return with you, Mr. Horbury. For, falsely accused as he is, in the interest of my friend I shall not lose sight of you again.'

'I don't understand you, I tell you again,' he said. 'I am going to London.'

'So am I.'

'Just as you please,' answered Mr. Horbury, marching into the booking-office, whilst a railway porter, who had stood open-mouthed listening to the conversation, trotted away with Mr. Horbury's portmanteau.

'First class single—no, I mean return,' corrected Mr. Horbury, 'to London,' he called to the clerk through the aperture in the booking-office.

'First class return, London,' said Oliver, also putting down his money by the side of his companion's.

The tickets were given out, the money swept into the till, and then the two men were on the platform together. The station-master, who recognised Mr. Horbury, and

touched his hat to him, hastened to open the door of a first-class carriage.

'Don't let this man travel in the same compartment with me. I object to him—am afraid of him,' said Mr. Horbury, in an agitated voice. 'See to that, please, will you? He threatens me.'

'Certainly, I will see to it, sir. This carriage, young man, if you please,' he said to Oliver Toope, who kept his place at Mr. Horbury's side.

'Very well,' said Oliver, 'any carriage in the same train will do. But,' he said, in a low tone to James Horbury, 'this is a useless journey, and I warn you it is against your interest to make it.'

'Why?'

'They will wire for your arrest before you reach the end of your journey,' Oliver replied, 'and I shall be in the train handy

for your identification. It will look like flying from justice, Mr. Horbury. And you are wanted here so badly.'

'What do you mean? Wanted where?'

'On the hills.'

'On the hills!' exclaimed James Horbury. 'Did you say on the hills?'

'The body of a woman has been found at the bottom of the old Beloc shaft this morning, and we think that it is Mrs. Faremouth's. Come and see!'

James Horbury's jaw dropped, his gray colour changed to a lurid puce, and he drew back his foot slowly, reluctantly, from the step of the train.

'I—I am not going to London,' he said, in a husky voice to the station-master, and a few seconds afterwards the whistle sounded, and the train glided from the platform, bearing only James Horbury's portmanteau to town.

CHAPTER XXX.

A LAST EFFORT.

James Horbury and Oliver Toope stood facing each other on the platform from which the 10.30 express had glided away. The porters bundled off with their empty barrows; the caretaker of the bookstall breathed more freely after the run upon his stock of provincial dailies—the London dailies not turning up till noonday at Great Storn's Head; the empty flies and hotel omnibuses rattled out of the station yard; the stationmaster, after staring at the two men left behind, and waiting in vain for an explanation of their

eccentric behaviour, strutted into his office and slammed the door behind him; some pigeons, which had been disturbed by the recent traffic, came from the open, swirled round and round, dipped under the terminus again, and dropped unconcernedly on the line in search of provender, quite convinced that there was no danger to life and limb now that the London express had steamed from the station.

James Horbury felt sick and ill, and would have been glad to lie down, but he felt how necessary it was to preserve some appearance of self-possession at this crisis of his miserable life. So much depended upon it, and Oliver Toope appeared to know so much more than anybody else. Where had he acquired his information, and how was it that it had not found its way to the town yet, and that this man appeared to have it

all to himself? Was it a hoax, after all, to detain him at Great Storn's Head?—a mere ruse, so that he should not start for London by the 10.30 express? Successful as it had been, cruel deception as it was, he should be very, very glad if it were all a trick played upon him—ah, so intensely grateful! He glanced up at Oliver Toope's firm, grave face, but it was firmer and graver than ever It was all true! It was found out; and he —God help him!—was found out, too, unless the little world around him and in which he lived would believe his version of the story, and that it was Claude Faremouth who, in his rage and jealousy and disappointment, had killed his wife. Why should not that be considered the truth?—it was far more likely. He, Horbury, had had the opportunity of killing his wife's sister any day within the last ten years, and instead of that

he had protected and cherished her, and constituted his home her home. There was not a human being who knew him who would not put that to his credit. He had taken every care of Gertrude Faremouth—he and Lavinia together. The servants could testify to the fact, and even Muriel Reeves. This Claude Faremouth was a wanderer on the face of the earth—a Bohemian, a ne'er-do-well; one whose word nobody would take; a man who had been searching for his wife, and vowing vengeance against her probably for many years, and to elude whom they had even changed their name to Gladwell, knowing what a desperate man he was. Yes, it was a far more rational story than that he, a respectable householder, who had been known in the town, and had spent much money in the town for years, should dream of taking the life of an inoffensive

woman. This Oliver Toope, and the hateful girl to whom he was engaged, might think the worst of him; even be awfully —damnably — close to the truth; but there was no proof against him, and their words would go for nothing. The game was not played out, let them say what they pleased, think what they pleased. His chances were better than Claude Faremouth's.

They had tried to frighten him—they *had* frightened him. He owned it, for he was not a strong-minded man. It was a question of blackmail, he should tell the world presently; and he had had the courage to resist it, knowing the justice of his cause, and the doubtful character of the man already in prison under suspicion of a crime which Faremouth's friends had had the heartlessness to endeavour to foist upon

him. As if anyone at Great Storn's Head would believe a word against James Horbury's character.

He pulled himself together, took a long breath, and said to the big man confronting him :

'You will understand, Mr. Toope, that I postpone my journey entirely at your request, and to oblige you.'

'Oh! thankee,' said Mr. Toope, with careless gratitude.

'I agree with you that it is wise in every way that I should remain; but your manner was so abrupt and discourteous that you made me angry. I am better now.'

'I am glad to hear it,' said Oliver. 'We will start, then.'

'Start? Where?'

'To the Beloc Shaft.'

'Yes, certainly,' said James Horbury, almost with cheerful alacrity; but his natural colour, which had been slowly returning to his face, vanished again. 'I am more likely to recognise the lady than anyone else.'

'Except Mrs. Horbury.'

'Yes; but she must be spared all the excitement that is possible,' he answered quickly. 'She is very ill. You know that —Miss Reeves knows that.'

'There is no particular hurry; but she will have to see the body of this poor woman—so will Miss Reeves, and the servants of your establishment.'

'Of course, presently.'

'At their own convenience,' said Oliver; 'but they have been communicated with by this time.'

'Already?'

'I was coming to Rossendale when I caught sight of your fly; but there were others following me.'

'You were in a devilish hurry,' said Mr. Horbury satirically.

'Yes; there was a friend of mine in trouble.'

'And you—a sensible man—have no suspicion of your friend?'

'Not in the least. Because——'

'Yes, yes. Don't tell me again,' he interrupted. 'You have been unjust, cruel, slanderous; but I shall prove you in the wrong.'

Oliver Toope shook his head, but he did not repeat his charge against James Horbury, and James Horbury did not press the question, or wish to hear too much of the nature of his companion's suspicions. Silence was indispensable, and he would not be

taken off his guard again, let Toope say or do what he pleased.

'I am very glad that you were in time to stop my going to London,' he ventured to say, however, and in a raised voice, so that the few loiterers in the station might hear him make his declaration with great distinctness; 'it is so important that I should remain here. I see that now, Mr. Toope.'

'Yes, I thought you would,' said Oliver.

'Shall we take a carriage as far as Essenway? That is beyond the village, and the nearest point to the hills,' said Horbury.

'It will save time,' said Oliver. 'I was going to suggest it myself.'

'And the money for the tickets to London—I think I can get that returned to you, and without any of the usual formality.' He spoke as if he would like to

confer this little favour on Mr. Toope, but that gentleman shook his head.

'That can be arranged presently,' said Oliver. 'I would rather be getting on to the Beloc Shaft, now.'

'Very well,' said Mr. Horbury, wincing again.

Outside the station they were able to secure a fly, into which the two men got, and thus the journey began—the last journey!

CHAPTER XXXI.

AT THE BELOC SHAFT.

From the station yard to the road which led into the town were driven Oliver Toope and James Horbury, through the main streets of the busy town to the country road beyond, which led, by slow ascents, to the small village of Essenway, and, if one chose to follow its deviations, by many ups and downs into the heart of Wales. At the village of Essenway, there was a narrow footpath at the back of a cluster of white-washed cottages, and this path led upwards over the hills, by various cross-cuts, to

Llanwyssander, on the coast, and other villages nestling in sleepy dales and clefts, to which the summer tourist seldom strayed, and where English was an unknown tongue.

There was a stir in the streets that morning—an unusual air of excitement. Knots of people at all the street-corners; boys and girls running to and fro; flys and omnibuses, carts and carriages full of visitors and townsfolk; whilst the four-in-hand coaches advertised for numerous pleasure routes were standing empty at the doors of the hotels, there being metal more attractive at the Beloc Shaft, whither all who could afford the time were wending their way.

The parade was not deserted, but the visitors who were strong-minded were melting away by degrees, and making for the common centre of attraction.

Oliver Toope no longer had the secret to

himself; it had spread itself over the town like a blight, infecting and affecting everybody. Here was a legitimate sensation, and nothing extra to pay for it: the body of a murdered woman had been discovered at the bottom of the Beloc Shaft, which opened into an old, played-out copper mine that had had its day some thirty years ago, ruining the last proprietary very neatly.

Great Storn's Head was roused out of its calm, business-like existence; it was the first cool, systematic murder of importance that it had ever had to boast of, and it was making the most of the situation.

James Horbury sat back in the open fly and looked round him with an air of consternation. He knew Great Storn's Head as well as any man—the characteristic coolness and stolidity of its townsfolk, the indolence, and at times the fussiness of its

visitors; but he had seen nothing like this scene before, and it bewildered him. It even made his heart sink again, but he would not have had Mr. Toope suspect that for all the world just then.

'What a crowd!' he muttered. 'There must be a circus coming into the town, or it is fair-day somewhere.'

Toope shook his head.

'They have heard the news,' Oliver said.

'I'll not believe it,' Horbury answered irritably, as a man might have done who had been contradicted flatly in a veracious statement; 'a woman who has tumbled down an old shaft is not likely to create this stir and confusion.'

'The people think it murder.'

'Crowds always think the worst,' said Mr. Horbury. 'Mrs. Faremouth — supposing that this is Mrs. Faremouth's body that

has been discovered—may have wandered over the hills, lost her way, and fallen down the shaft. It could not be the first accident of the kind that has occurred in Wales; why do people call it murder?'

'We shall soon know.'

'A pure accident, depend upon it, Toope. I believe now that Claude Faremouth is entirely innocent of the charge brought against him,' said Mr. Horbury.

Oliver Toope was a trifle surprised at the new and cool manner which his companion had assumed, and his dark eyes seemed to grow larger and blacker as he surveyed James Horbury. But he was not impressed—even if he were interested in this new phase of character.

'I have considered him innocent all along,' said Oliver in reply.

'It has been more convenient to

suspect me,' James Horbury answered shortly.

'Yes; it has.'

James Horbury did not speak for a considerable time after this; he had much matter for reflection and food for speculation, too. What was known? What was guessed at? What was the merest idle rumour? Hope had sprung up in his breast again; he believed he should come off scot-free. Who was to prove that he was guilty and Claude Faremouth innocent? Who was to prove anything—against anybody—for the matter of that? What an ass he had been to let his fears get the mastery of him, and endeavour to run away! It was so much the better policy to brave it out now that he came to consider the position seriously.

Still, the crowd surprised him, rendered him irritable, made him feel very dizzy.

The people were tramping along the high-road grave as judges, men and women and children, whose faces he had never seen before, and wondered where they had sprung from; others who knew him exchanged greetings with him, or touched their hats deferentially, according to their status; many appeared to admire the haste which he was making for the scene of action. He was the first to make sure—he had been very fond of his sister-in-law—it was a sad business, but it was his duty to be present, people thought.

'You see, nobody has your wicked suspicions,' he said to Oliver Toope, quite boastfully.

'Nobody knows as much as I do,' answered Oliver, in a boastful manner, as it seemed to James Horbury, who clutched him by the arm at once.

'What do you mean by that? Haven't you told me—everything?'

'It would be too long a story,' said Toope.

'Ah! well, it does not matter, Toope,' he answered. 'We shall see the body soon enough. I don't believe myself that Gertrude Faremouth is dead at all.'

Oliver did not reply, and Horbury appeared to object suddenly to his companion's silence. He shook him roughly by the arm this time.

'Have you seen the body?' he asked eagerly.

'Yes.'

'Then——'

He came to a full stop. There was something in Olver Toope's expression that he did not like. It were well not to ask any more questions.

'You are an early riser,' he said irrelevantly. 'There is nothing like early rising in the country to keep one in health.'

Oliver nodded his head as if in acquiescence to this well-known but much abused axiom, and Mr. Horbury screwed himself round in his seat, and almost turned his back upon Oliver. And in this way, and in a kind of funeral procession, as it were, owing to the number of people on the road, they reached the village of Essenway. James Horbury glanced up at the great green slope of the hill rising behind the cottages. It was dotted with innumerable figures all making for the point of interest; even the men from the quarries miles away had struck work, and were streaming from all the points of the compass towards the Beloc Shaft. Mr. Horbury gnashed his teeth and inwardly cursed their curiosity. What

a show was being made of it all—what a fuss over one dead woman!

'Shall I wait?' said the flyman, as Oliver and Horbury alighted, and Horbury, who was quick to pay the fare, answered sharply:

'No.'

Then the two men began to ascend the slope together, with the people scattered far and wide. When they had gone up a fair distance, James Horbury made a cross-cut away from the general body of people towards an extensive growth of trees, and fertile woodland, springing out of the side of the hills, and meandering along it—a fair feature in the landscape.

'This way?' said Oliver.

'It is the nearer way to the shaft. We wind on under the oaks and larches, and come out at the mouth of the Beloc Mine.

This used to be a favourite walk of mine, Toope, on sunny afternoons, or early summer mornings, when times were easier with me.'

He spoke mournfully, and Oliver was touched in spite of himself, and the same feeling of commiseration which Muriel had had for this man yesternight stole over him —he knew not why. Was it pity for a man who might be scarcely accountable for his actions, save to his God one day, and as God judges the actions of our poor humanity? The two men did not speak again. The ascent became steep and rendered conversation difficult, had they had any wish to exchange further words together. Presently they had reached the wood, and were out of the sunshine, and under rustling green leaves. Here James Horbury resumed the conversation suddenly.

'Your sweetheart, Muriel, used to meet

me here,' he said, with a snarl that displayed all his white, strong teeth, and made him look very cur-like on the instant, 'before breakfast; when Mrs. Horbury was comfortably asleep, she would come up here to meet me.'

'That's a lie!' said Oliver Toope.

'Ask her. She will not deny the statement.'

'No, Horbury,' said Oliver, shaking his head; 'I will not insult her by so foolish a question, jealous fool as I have been before now. I shall not ask her.'

'Oh, I am not imputing any harm to Miss Reeves. She is a very exemplary young woman, but we met occasionally. Upon my soul we did,' he said.

'Have you nothing more serious to think of than this?' asked Oliver sternly.

'There is nothing of a serious nature that is likely to affect me up there,' he replied,

shrugging his shoulders. 'I am sure of it. Nothing to do with me or Mrs. Faremouth or her husband. We will have that Claude out of gaol to-morrow. Mark my words if we do not.'

Oliver Toope did not want to mark any more words of this extraordinary and malignant individual, and became once more silent.

They passed on under the trees, a few stragglers preceding and following them, knowing the way as well as James Horbury, and then they came out into the open, and dipped suddenly again into a basin-shaped hollow of the hills, where was the old disused entrance to the Beloc Mine, and where a crowd had long since congregated. There was a murmuring of voices as they appeared. James Horbury was too well known, and known also to be too deeply interested in

the tragedy, not to cause a sensation by his appearance there. He looked round furtively, and endeavoured hard to read what was on the numerous faces turned in his direction, and to wonder if amongst them there were any who knew all the truth and would proclaim it before high heaven, and overwhelm him. But there were all kinds of faces, significant, and stern, and curious, and idiotic, and they bewildered him.

To Oliver's surprise, he passed his arm through his, and leaned upon him for support.

'If you don't mind, Mr. Toope,' he said appealingly. 'I am not strong, and this is an ordeal, under any circumstances. Is it not?'

'It is.'

'The police have got up here, too. Here's Towson, and Griffiths, and Davis—limping

Davis. Quite right; it keeps the crowd from getting unruly. Let us get to the shaft,' he said.

Arm-in-arm the two men proceeded, the crowd making way for them. Suddenly a woman's shrill voice called out 'James!' in wild entreaty, and James Horbury clung to Toope's arm as an affrighted child might have done.

'Lavinia!' he said; 'good God! it is Lavinia! How did she get up here, and she so weak and ill?'

'I cannot tell,' said Oliver, who had recognised Muriel as well as Mrs. Horbury standing side by side on a mound, beyond a little forest of wheels and chains and cranks all rusty from disuse. At the mouth of the shaft one wheel was spinning round as if in protest against the inactivity of the rest of the machinery, and here was a big crate-like

apparatus swinging over the mouth of the mine, with two men with lighted candles in their caps standing in it.

'James! James!' Mrs. Horbury called again.

'Not now,' James Horbury muttered. 'I bade her good-bye only two hours or so ago—good-bye for ever it was, I thought. And it is, Toope, I dare say. Where—where is the body?'

'At the bottom of the shaft. It is not to be brought up yet, or disturbed in any way, the police say,' said a man just by. 'There are a dozen or so men down there. We cannot make out either who took away the rails and fences from the mouth of Beloc; for that was a long job, and with them no one could have fallen through. They——'

'Don't jaw about what is not your busi-

ness, man,' said Horbury savagely. 'Is the cage going down now?'

'Yes.'

'I will go, too. I am Mr. Gladwell, of Rossendale. I—I wish to see if the woman killed is my wife's sister. Why the deuce can't you let me go down?'

'We don't want to stop you, sir,' said a policeman. 'You will be of help to them down there. They will be very glad to see you.'

'Of course. Stand aside, good people. I am Mr. Gladwell.'

He had turned to his old dead gray again, but he pushed his way to the front, and stepped into the cage with a jaunty air. Oliver Toope quickly followed him. Then they went down together into the darkness, as into the jaws of hell.

CHAPTER XXXII.

NEMESIS.

For ever afterwards in the memory of Oliver Toope there lingered that nightmare scene at the bottom of the Beloc Mine, to which he had descended in the darkness, and out of the sight of his kind, to keep James Horbury company—to make sure, even, that James Horbury did not escape him, and leave Claude Faremouth for a victim.

For long, long afterwards, in many haunted slumbers, there would come to Oliver the swaying cage—like a gigantic

crate—descending slowly into the bowels of the earth, the grim miners with the candles in their caps, the trembling figure of James Horbury between them, the rough-hewn, jagged marks and strata of the sides of the shaft, shored up by planks and big rusty bosses of iron; the rugged floor of the mine, which opened out right and left to the various declines which sank deeper and deeper still, and down which trolleys or trucks used to rattle in the old days before the copper 'pegged out.' They were dense, dark, and gaping apertures, of innermost darkness now, leading to far-off galleries, choked up by fallen rock or filled with stagnant water which it was no one's business to pump away.

An unsafe, as well as an unprofitable mine, experts had labelled it years ago, and blocked the entrance to the shaft by various

cross-pieces of planking, which had been stealthily removed by degrees in the early mornings by James Horbury, who had known first of the dawning sanity of Gertrude Faremouth, whom he had defrauded of her money, and so had prepared this end for her and her evidence together. And there she was! There was all that was left of the ill-fated woman in that awful heap upon the ground at the bottom of the shaft down which the victim had been hurled on the night she went away from Rossendale—the first night in which she had learned to trust James Horbury.

The bottom of the shaft widened out into a kind of rocky crypt, and there was room for a score or so of men, who stood with lanterns in their hands or candles in their caps — one man with a flaring torch was singularly prominent — standing round the

ghastly, fœtid, awful evidence of murder. There was a gentleman upon his knees, apparently booking some details in his note-book very carefully, but whether for the police or the press, or both, James Horbury could not guess, and he was anxious to know, too.

'What is that man doing, Toope?' he asked, in a husky voice, as they stood at the bottom of the shaft, and the empty 'crate' swung to and fro like a pendulum, before slowly floating up towards the daylight again, bearing one man who could stand it no longer, and who was anxious for fresh air, and was as sick as a dog.

'I don't know what he is doing,' was Oliver's answer.

'You profess not to know anything, but you do,' Horbury said sharply. 'I suppose this is a trap.'

'They asked me to send for you to identify the body. Why should it be a trap?' Oliver replied.

'No—no; certainly not, Toope. But you said—— Gentlemen,' he cried suddenly, in a sharp, ringing tone that was new in him, and which strangely roused the echoes of the mine, 'don't crowd round the body like that! How is it possible to arrive at any right conclusion if we all get in one another's way? Please make room for me. I am James Gladwell, of Rossendale; you all know me. I have been sent for lest that —that thing there!—should chance to be a missing sister of my wife's. Not at all likely — not in any way likely — but for the general satisfaction, please allow me to see if there is anything which I could identify as belonging to Mrs. Gertrude Faremouth.'

It was a long speech hurriedly delivered,

with one word rather inclined to run into and trip up another. There was no confusion apparent now, but a new dictatorial pomposity which he was not given to display.

There was a suppressed murmur from the little crowd, and it rolled along in muffled sounds through the various inlets to the mine, and sounded like thunder in the distance, the mutterings of a coming storm.

Quickly there was a passage made for James Horbury to advance to the front; no one wished to stand in his way, and everybody was already anxious for the truth. At the end of the human passage was the heap of bloody clothes upon the ground, and a lock or two of golden hair, and two thin green hands, one of which held something in its clutch. And that was not to be disturbed —nothing was to be touched till the photo-

grapher had arrived from Great Storn's Head with his camera and magnesium light, and done his best to give a faithful presentment of the poor mortality lying crushed and wrecked there.

James Horbury stared before him, stopped suddenly, and then backed two or three paces in the new horror which had seized upon him.

'Where is Toope?' he asked, looking wildly round, as though Oliver Toope had been the dearest friend of his life, and he could not proceed further without his assistance and advice.

'What is it that you want with me?' asked Oliver.

'Come with me!' he said in a husky whisper. 'I am afraid. I cannot go to it alone!'

He put his hand in Oliver's arm, and

walked painfully along with him. The people he passed were all eyes, he was sure they were all eyes, which glared ominously at him. Strange faces, too—not the face of one man whom he had ever seen before. Where were his friends, that they were afraid to stand by him at the last!

James Horbury and his companion went on to the end, and then there was another pause, and Horbury took off his hat, removed his hand from Oliver's arm, and passed it across his forehead, cold with a death sweat.

'Where is Lavinia?' he asked in a whisper. 'Why does she keep away with all the rest of them? I should have liked her with me —very—much!'

'Mr. Gladwell, is there anything before you by which you can identify the body?' asked a strange, official kind of voice that jarred upon him.

'No. It is not Gertrude Faremouth—not a bit like the woman in any way,' he replied to this, but he looked straight over the heads of the group, and not at all at what remained of his victim. He could not look at that!

'You are certain?'

'Perfectly certain.'

'Your servants say that this is Mrs. Faremouth without a doubt.'

'Wretched liars — every one of them,' was the uncomplimentary response to this, and very emphatically delivered.

'Will you look more closely, please?'

'No—no—I'd rather not,' said James Horbury, backing once more. 'I cannot look again!'

'Try, please.'

'Who are you, with all your questions, I should like to know,' said Horbury, evin-

cing more excitement. 'I tell you that this is not Gertrude Faremouth, and that my wife will say the same. It is not a bit like her.'

'Send for Mrs. Gladwell. She is above; I have seen her,' said another voice.

'Oh, for God's sake, don't,' he screamed, 'she is so weak a woman! Give her time. She cannot come down here—not here!'

'The right hand, Mr. Gladwell, has hold of a scarf in which is set a pin—a gold hand holding a large pearl, which is marked and lined like a globe—ha! don't touch it, sir!'

James Horbury had dashed forward and stooped low to make sure of this, but there were strong hands to hold him back.

'Someone has put it there — that's —

that's not mine!' Horbury cried frantically. 'Some scoundrel has put it there because it's like—one I had—years ago.'

'Your housemaid, Mary Jones, swears to it.'

'My wife—when she comes—will tell you a—a very different story,' he said, backing completely away now in his alarm; 'let me get into the air—I am choking down here. I am indeed!'

He had got to the back again and was leaning helplessly against the side of the shaft—a sorry spectacle—his eyes half-closed, his jaw dropped, his hands clasped together almost in prayer.

The cage came swinging down again, and attention for a moment was directed to the new-comers, two policemen and the man with the camera, singularly prominent.

James Gladwell was safe enough down

there, the people were sure, but when they looked round again he was gone!

There was only his hat lying crushed upon the floor, and he had stooped and dashed like a madman into one of the apertures leading to the lower depths of the mine. One man endeavoured to follow him, as a cry—like that of a wild beast's—welled from the darkness below, but he came back affrighted and tottering like an old man.

'He has gone over into the "Black Pit,"' he said; 'there's a big drop there—where it gave way in '87—fifty feet or more.'

The Black Pit! Yes—a fitting end to the career of James Horbury.

But not to our story, which lies presently in the sunlight that has stolen to the lives of our characters — of all save one poor woman who sits in shadow-land, and whom Claude Faremouth tries to soothe and to

console, for his lost wife's sake. Yes, there is sunshine beyond, and Muriel Reeves and Oliver stand therein, hand in hand, in the brightness and radiance of a new life before them, with the pealing of their wedding bells making the air thrill with joy and vibrating in their young, strong hearts.

THE END.

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